



News Release

For Immediate Release

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VDOF 1804

Spring Wildfire Season Begins Feb. 15th in Virginia Risk Varies Across the Commonwealth

As wildfire season approaches, an increased threat is expected in some areas of Virginia. Factors influencing this risk include a lingering lack of rain, minimal snowfall and continued growth into areas where development and natural areas meet. More than 60 percent of Virginia's annual average of 1,000 wildfires occur in the spring – with March and April historically being the most active months. Escaped fires from debris burning and arson continue to be Virginia's leading cause of wildfires.

To help reduce the number of wildfires this time of year, the Commonwealth's 4 p.m. Burning Law goes into effect February 15. The law prohibits open burning between the hours of midnight and 4 p.m. each day. Burning is permitted between the hours of 4 p.m. and midnight. However, if weather conditions are such that a fire is likely to escape, officials at the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF) encourage people to refrain from burning, regardless of the time. Such conditions include low humidity, warm temperatures and winds over 10 miles per hour. The law remains in effect until April 30.

"The 4 p.m. Burning Law is one of the most important tools we have in the prevention of wildfires in Virginia," said John Miller, VDOF's director of fire and emergency response. "Restricting where and when folks can burn during the spring goes a long way in reducing our fire starts."

A violation of the 4 p.m. Burning Law is a Class 3 misdemeanor punishable by up to a \$500 fine. In addition to the criminal violation, however, those who allow a fire to escape are liable for the cost of suppressing the fire as well as any damage caused to others' property.

As the population of Virginia continues to grow, so does the potential for wildfires. Ninety-four percent of all wildfires in Virginia are caused by humans; therefore, as population increases, so does the potential for human-caused wildfires. This is the concept behind Smokey Bear's most famous saying: "Only You Can Prevent Wildfires."

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Fred Turck, VDOF's fire prevention manager, said, "While a lot of this new growth takes place in 'communities,' people also build homes in traditionally rural areas. A wildfire can destroy a single home or multiple homes as we saw all too graphically last fall in several areas across the country. The continued growth in wildland-urban interface areas has led to enhanced collaboration among homeowners, local governments and the Virginia Department of Forestry."

The Virginia Department of Forestry is reaching out to homeowners, community leaders, fire departments, local governments and state and federal partners hoping that a well-informed individual or group can make a difference.

Virginians can prepare their properties for the spring wildfire season in the following ways:

- * Remove all branches that touch the house, garage, shed, etc.;
- * Clear all brush (tall grass, leaves, branches, weeds, etc.) within 30 feet of the home and other structures;
- * Keep gutters clear of debris;
- * Remove combustibles from under or near structures;
- * Trim branches up to 10 feet from the base of the tree and remove any vines from the trees;
- * Use gravel or chunky bark for mulch;
- * Keep flammable plants away from your home;
- * Maintain your driveway so that the clearance is at least 12 feet wide and 12 feet high, and make sure your house number is visible from the street/road.
- * Use fire-resistant materials for your roof, deck and siding projects.
- * Visit www.firewisevirginia.org for more info.

Preventing your debris pile or trash pile from escaping can reduce the number of wildfires by more than one-third . Obeying the 4 PM Law and following the guidelines listed here will help Smokey and all of Virginia prevent a wildfire from occurring.

- * Even if it is after 4PM DO NOT BURN on dry, windy days;
- * Plan to stay with your fire until it completely burns down;
- * Keep your piles small;

* Clear all dry grass and leaves from around your burn pile for at least 10 feet;

* Have water, a rake and shovel nearby;

Miller said, "If a fire does escape your control, call 911 immediately."

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