

The number one priority for the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDof) is wildfire suppression. Even with the 4 p.m. Burn Law in place, VDof responded to an average of 1,000 wildfires each year from 2005 to 2014. VDof personnel are highly trained and their efforts from July 1, 2013 through June 30, 2014 resulted in the protection of 1,258 homes, worth more than \$147 million. Unfortunately, about \$1.5 million in damage to other homes and structures occurred and more than \$6.8 million in timber was damaged. The best way to suppress a fire and protect your assets is prevention. The article below describes actions you can take to prevent wildfires on your land. JG

Do You Have a Fire Safety Plan for Your Woodlands?

By George Hurd, Penn State

One of a forest landowner's greatest dangers is a wildfire. Is your forested property in a condition that could survive a wildfire? Could firefighters easily get to a wildfire on your property? Do you have a plan that includes maps and details of exact locations for access and water supplies? Regardless of the season, conditions often prevail that allow wildfires to start. Wildfires can occur in any month, at any time of the day, destroying valuable woodlands and wildlife habitat. Droughts and dry conditions at various times of the year increase the risk for wildfires. Careless use of fire in wooded areas can also increase the chance of a wildfire, which can then quickly spread and threaten homes and human lives.

Whether you own a few acres or thousands, there are steps you can take to help reduce the potential for wildfire damage on your property while improving overall forest health and wildlife habitat. You can also help ensure firefighters are able to attack and extinguish any wildfires that do occur.

Roads provide critical access to your property so firefighters can extinguish wildfires while they are still small and do the least damage. According to the Pacific Northwest Extension Publication "Reducing Fire Risk on Your Forest Property" (<http://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/xmlui/handle/1957/19402>), fire and fuel breaks are more effective if anchored to a good road system. If you live on your forested property, roads also are critical for your escape and for fire trucks to get to and protect your home. The publication provides proven design criteria for your road system.

The availability of water during fire operations is critical. The location, access points, and availability of all water sources including streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, dry hydrants, water mains, and fire hydrants should be identified and mapped. Water sources are often a long distance from the fire, and it can take a great deal of time and effort to transport water to where it is needed. Additionally, transporting water requires equipment and personnel who could otherwise be fighting fire. The lack of readily available water can seriously impair the ability of firefighters to do their job in a safe and effective manner.

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Many people make their homes in woodland settings or near forests. These rural homeowners enjoy the beauty of the environment but also need to plan to address wildfire. Tips for homeowners in or near woodlands are available at the FEMA Wildfires website (<http://www.ready.gov/wildfires>).

For homes in or near woodlands, FEMA recommends homeowners create a safety zone around the home where no flammable materials are kept. Keep this zone clear of dead leaves, branches, and other materials that easily catch fire. Keep the roof and gutters free of flammable debris. Trim branches hanging over the house and trim shrubbery back from around the house. Widen the access road to the home for emergency vehicles in the event a wildfire does begin. Treat any flammable materials used as part of the home or deck with fire-retardant chemicals. You should report hazardous conditions that could cause a wildfire. Plan several escape routes away from your home by both car and foot.

Another good information resource for those who own homes in woodlands or are planning to build homes in or near forests is the Virginia Department of Forestry's FireWise website (<http://www.dof.virginia.gov/fire/firewiseva/index.htm>). This website provides information on landscaping for fire prevention, building a Firewise home, and even Firewise building materials.

To ensure that adequate measures are taken for the prevention and suppression of fire, forest landowners should have a fire safety plan for their woodlands. Additional information is available at the PA DCNR Wildfire Risk Reduction website (<http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/wildlandfire/firewise/index.htm>).

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