

Governor Phil Murphy

Governor Murphy, DEP Commissioner LaTourette Announce Actions to Help Prevent Wildfire Spread Across New Jersey

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NJ Wildfire SMART Emphasizes Fire Safety and Prevention

BURLINGTON COUNTY – Governor Murphy and Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Shawn LaTourette today announced a series of actions that emphasize the importance of wildfire safety, mitigation, awareness, response, and training – known as [NJ Wildfire SMART](https://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/fire/njwildfiresmart/) – and reduce wildfire spread as New Jersey heads into the spring wildfire season amid continued dry conditions statewide.

The NJ Wildfire SMART actions were announced during a roundtable led today by Governor Murphy, Environmental Protection Commissioner LaTourette, and the DEP Forest Fire Service with local officials in the fire-prone Pinelands region. Prolonged dry conditions statewide stretch back to late last summer, increasing the risk for wildfire in the spring, when weather conditions tend to be dry and windy.

“New Jersey experienced significant dryness this past fall, resulting in an extended wildfire season throughout the state in 2024 and providing a sobering reminder that we must be prepared for the spring wildfire season,” **said Governor Murphy**. “It is more important than ever that we share information and continue to work collaboratively to protect lives, properties, and communities.”

“Preparedness is essential, especially as climate change continues to exacerbate the frequency and intensity of wildfires in New Jersey,” **said Commissioner LaTourette**. “We need to be even more vigilant going into the spring wildfire season and follow the actions of NJ Wildfire SMART, which will help mitigate wildfire risk statewide.”

“The Forest Fire Service works year-round protecting New Jersey communities from the threat of wildfires,” **said Greg McLaughlin, Administrator for Forests & Natural Lands**. “In addition to protecting lives and property, the Forest Fire Service assists with natural disasters, maintains hundreds of miles of roads, works alongside multiple cooperators to develop and implement strategic plans that reduce the risk of future wildfires, and lends their talents to other states when wildfires strike.”

“Meeting with municipal partners ahead of New Jersey’s spring fire season is essential to strengthening communication, coordination and preparedness when addressing wildfire risk and responding to developing incidents,” **said Bill Donnelly, Chief of the DEP Forest Fire Service**. “We share the common goal of ensuring New Jersey’s communities and forest resources are protected from wildfires, and today’s roundtable allows us to proactively address any concerns.”

“Being located in the rural Pinelands and part of the Belleplain State Park area means the threat of forest fires is something we take seriously in Woodbine,” **said Woodbine Mayor Bill Pikolycky**. “I am grateful to Governor Murphy for taking a proactive role in addressing forest fire concerns, especially in light of what is happening in California. Woodbine has had a long relationship with our local and State of New Jersey Forest Fire Wardens and State of New Jersey Forestry Service. We have and continue to offer our airport as a base of operations for the Fire Service to land, refuel, and refill water tanks in the event of fire. We look forward to offering Woodbine and its airport to the New Jersey Forest Fire Service as a training and drill location for strategic planning in containing and fighting forest fires.”

“West Milford’s vast and scenic landscape, spanning over 80 square miles, has experienced the serious impact of wildfires firsthand. I was honored to participate in the roundtable discussion and am encouraged by the Administration’s commitment to proactive wildfire mitigation. I look forward to continuing our collaboration with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and the NJ Forest Fire Service to strengthen fire prevention, preparedness, and response efforts. By fostering key partnerships and securing additional funding, we must advocate for the resources needed to protect our residents, first responders, and natural environment. Wildfires recognize no boundaries, making a strong, coordinated approach vital to

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safeguarding our community,” **said West Milford Mayor Michele Dale.**

“I recommend increasing ‘controlled burn’ by our experts at the NJ Forest Fire Service to protect our beautiful acres of the Pinelands,” **said Bass River Mayor Rick Adams.**

“I think it’s very important that the Governor continues to support prescribed burning in the Pinelands. The Pinelands are a very volatile fire area, and what happened in California could very easily happen in the Pinelands,” **said Woodland Mayor William Degroff.**

“I would like to thank Governor Murphy, Commissioner LaTourette, and the New Jersey Forest Fire Service for their continued support in pre fire planning, including the thinning of fuels to make New Jersey a safer place for our residents,” **said Manchester Mayor Joseph Hankins.**

“As we watched the once-unimaginable images of the recent wildfires in California and our hearts ached for those impacted, our thoughts also turned to ways we can safeguard our state from similar devastation,” **said Assembly Speaker Craig J. Coughlin.** “Collaboration with local officials will be crucial in developing strategies to strengthen both our preparedness and our response, ensuring that we can effectively protect our communities. Today’s roundtable discussion is an important step in that process and I commend Governor Murphy and his administration for proactively engaging stakeholders.”

“As we approach wildfire season, it is crucial that we come together as a community to ensure our state is prepared to face any potential threats,” **said Senator Carmen Amato, Jr.** “Thursday’s roundtable discussion with Governor Murphy, DEP Commissioner LaTourette, and local officials is an essential step in strengthening our response efforts and safeguarding our residents. By working collaboratively, we can ensure that New Jersey is ready to protect lives, preserve our natural resources, and mitigate the risks posed by wildfires. I’m proud to be part of this vital conversation and will continue to advocate for the resources and policies needed to keep our communities safe.”

“South Jersey is home to over 1.1 million acres of Pine Barrens, a vital part of our community, and an area that is at an increased risk for forest fires,” **said Assemblywoman Andrea Katz.** “We must be prepared to control any fire. Protecting our region and our natural resources is paramount, and I’m grateful to everyone who gathered today to focus on this critical issue.”

“Wildfires can claim people’s lives and have a devastating impact on communities, wildlife, and budgets,” **said Assemblyman Greg Myhre.** “It is critical to support a well-trained and properly equipped forest fire service along with forest management practices that protect our state’s forests and nearby communities including the Pinelands National Reserve which covers a large portion of the 9th Legislative District.”

“We must ensure our firefighters have funds and manpower to do what they do best,” **said Assemblyman Michael Torrissi.** “We can’t leave them high and dry by denying them the resources they need.”

“Our top priority must be keeping our communities safe, and that includes protecting our citizens from the devastating effects of fires,” **said Assemblyman Brian Rumpf.** “We must invest in robust fire prevention measures, support our brave firefighters, and educate the public on fire safety to save lives and safeguard our homes.”

Spring Wildfire Season and Growing Threats from Climate Change

Spring is typically peak wildfire season in New Jersey. Between mid-March and mid-May, trees and underbrush are still leafing out, relative humidity is generally low, and windy days are common. The combination of these factors means forested lands dry out quickly. Additionally, porous sandy soils in the vast Pinelands region of southern New Jersey do not retain moisture for long, exacerbating drying and making it possible for a fire to spark only hours after rainfall.

Climate change is making wildfire seasons longer. According to Climate Central, a research nonprofit, nationwide analysis of weather conditions during the past 50 years found that the annual number of fire weather days has risen by 10 days in northern New Jersey and four days in southern New Jersey. This data mirrors the DEP’s own [2020 Scientific Report on Climate Change \(https://dep.nj.gov/wp-content/uploads/climatechange/nj-scientific-report-2020.pdf\)](https://dep.nj.gov/wp-content/uploads/climatechange/nj-scientific-report-2020.pdf) which states, “wildfire seasons could be lengthened, and the frequency of large fires increased due to the hot, dry periods that will result from increased temperatures.”

NJ Wildfire SMART

Since the onset of the abnormally dry period on Sept. 1, 2024, the Forest Fire Service has responded to 884 wildfires, which collectively burned 4,945.25 acres, a substantial increase over the number of wildfires and acreage burned during the same time period for the three preceding years. Nine of these were classified as “major wildfires,” each exceeding 100 acres, and posed a threat to 273 structures combined.

In recognition of these growing threats, the Forest Fire Service has launched NJ Wildfire SMART (safety, mitigation, awareness, resources, and training), a series of actions that emphasize steps and information resources for reducing wildfire risk and spread.

Safety: As wildfire seasons grow longer and dry conditions persist, proactive preparedness and strong collaboration are vital to safeguard lives, property and natural resources. Prevention remains the most important part of the equation (<https://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/fire/program/firewise.html>), as most wildfires can be avoided by adhering to commonsense safety tips. For example, homeowners should remove pine needles, leaves, and other debris from gutters, and smokers are reminded to properly dispose of cigarettes and smoking materials. After using a fireplace or woodburning stove, fully douse ashes with water since both can emit embers that spark fires. Dispose of fully doused ashes in a metal can or cylinder.

Property owners in wooded areas need to be especially aware of their environment and should take steps such as maintaining defensible barriers, or cleared areas, around structures (<https://nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/fire/program/firewise.html>). They should create space of at least 30 feet between homes and flammable vegetation in forested or wooded areas, and 100 feet from homes in the Pinelands region. These buffers should be free from vegetation that will burn easily, such as fallen leaves, pine needles, twigs and branches. Property owners should also make sure firetrucks can access driveways.

Visit [njwildfire.org](https://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/fire/) (<https://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/fire/>) for more information.

Mitigation: The Forest Fire Service is at work throughout the year planning and implementing a variety of forest management projects to further reduce the threat of wildfire. As conditions allow, the Forest Fire Service implements a proactive program of prescribed burns to reduce fallen debris and understory that can fuel wildfires. Fuel breaks, a manmade change in forest fuel characteristics, and firebreaks, a constructed clearing used to stop fires, can both change fire behavior while providing an opportunity to slow or stop the fire. Prescribed fire also improves habitat for plants and animals, reduces the presence of damaging insects and ticks, and recycles nutrients into the soil.

Awareness: Information about wildfire risks and mitigation is especially critical for people who live within or adjacent to forested areas, also known as the wildland-urban interface. Information tools the Forest Fire Service has introduced in response to the growing dangers include:

- The NJ Fire Danger Dashboard (<https://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/fire/infotools/conditions-restrictions.html>), found on the Forest Fire Service website (<https://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/fire/>), is updated frequently with a fire danger rating by county, displays a color-coded index of different fire danger ratings and provides a snapshot view of risk by county. The dashboard also displays any current campfire restrictions that may be implemented depending on fire weather conditions such as high winds or prolonged dry periods.
- The ([https://newjerseywildfirerisk.com/](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://t.e2ma.net/click/v1yizm/7ys5259b/3ntfdbb_!!J30X0ZrnC1oQtba!P8mojHTHK2IJwkGeAdq74YgKMd6FaRl3F9zdexVguXno9KSgBOsjJu9Y6-FmxyN4dhx1XsgSm0mG6RlrQQ6D_VT$)New Jersey Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (<a href=)) (NJWRAP) compiles data and resources to assist residents, community leaders and fire professionals in taking actions to mitigate the threat of wildfire risk around their property and in their community. Data and preparedness resources presented in the portal were developed by the nation's wildfire experts, with Forest Fire Service personnel providing practical and local information.
- The Forest Fire Service also keeps the public informed through its social media platforms on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/NJForestFireService>) and X (<https://x.com/njdepforestfire?mx=2>), posting information on wildfires that are deemed major, or at least 100 acres in size; involve structures that are threatened, meaning they are in the vicinity of an active wildfire; or result in road closures. The Forest Fire Service provides updates in real time as necessary, as well as progress on containment status and other key information for public awareness.

Response: A network of 21 fire towers across the state are critical to the Forest Fire Service's mission of early detection and rapid response to wildfires. Fire Observers, trained in taking weather readings and reading smoke and fire behavior, scan the horizon from the towers looking for smoke, triangulate and pinpoint the location of the smoke with other nearby towers, and dispatch resources to investigate the cause. Fire towers frequently dispatch resources to the source of smoke several minutes before the first 9-1-1 call is placed.

The Forest Fire Service is the lead agency for all wildland fires in the Garden State and initiates the incident command structure once arriving on scene. Local fire departments may also be requested to assist with establishing water supply or protect improved property and structures while the Forest Fire Service focuses on containment and suppression of the main wildfire.

Aircraft for observation or suppression may also be deployed in support of wildfire response. The Forest Fire Service maintains a fleet of three Bell UH-1H helicopters for suppression, two Bell 206 Jet Rangers, one Bell 47 and three Cessna fixed-wing aircraft for observation. Additionally, for 30 days each spring, the Forest Fire Service contracts additional fixed-wing aircraft capable of dropping several hundred gallons of water to assist in the rapid response to any wildland fires that may spark

These activities are directed by fire wardens and staff from a command post that is a central location for communications and deployment of resources, including wildland fire trucks and aircraft.

Training: The Forest Fire Service's national leadership in implementing prescribed fire and fighting wildfires frequently draws

firefighters, students, scientists, and researchers from around the country and world to New Jersey to learn about prescribed burning, the fire adaptability and ecology of the Pinelands region and forest management.

The Forest Fire Service is committed to field and professional training in all facets of wildfire suppression, the science of firefighting, sharing resources and experience based on the experience gained in the fire-prone Pinelands, and assisting with wildfire response in all parts of the nation.

For nearly 40 years, the New Jersey Forest Fire Service has offered aid to many states – including Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia, Washington and Wyoming. These out-of-state deployments allow Forest Fire Service members to receive national certifications with experience that can be brought home to help protect lives, property, and natural resources in New Jersey.

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