

## **Dry and windy conditions spark wildfires**

**By KATHLEEN DUFFY**

*The Tabernacle Sun*

A massive forest fire in Tabernacle burned for days and consumed around 1,000 acres of land, beginning Monday, April 9 and ending days later.

The fire was first reported shortly after midnight on April 9, making it suspicious in nature, according to Michael Achey, assistant division forest fire warden with the New Jersey Forest Fire Service, at a press conference later that day.

Usually, wild fires begin during the daylight, he said, which is the ideal time for fires to burn.

It took personnel more than two days to fully control the fire, called the South Park Fire, which closed down parts of South Park Road and Sooy Place Road.

### **Prevention is key**

Wildfires can spread quickly in New Jersey, threatening homes, property, natural resources and human lives, yet most are preventable, the DEP said in a statement on April 10.

To reduce the risk of prompting a fire, the DEP provided a list of precautions to take, especially while the dry conditions persist in the area.

According to the statement, use ashtrays in vehicles rather than tossing cigarette butts outside.

“Discarding cigarettes, matches and smoking materials is a violation of New Jersey law,” it said.

DEP spokesman Larry Hajna urged residents to “be very cautious” with cigarettes, matches, fires, wood stoves and fireplaces.

A spark can happen extremely fast, he said, especially in dry conditions.

The weather pattern from weak cold fronts has been going on for weeks, he said, which has dried the forest grounds and has made the leaves as “dry as dust.”

The Pinelands ecosystem is dry to begin with, he said, and rain is needed to break the model.

The DEP’s statement urged campers to “obtain necessary permits for campfires” and not to leave fires unattended.

“Douse them completely,” the statement said.

It is also important to keep matches away from children, teach them about the dangers of fire and report suspicious vehicles and people, it continued.

“Arson is a major cause of forest fires in New Jersey,” it said.

Setting fires is no laughing matter.

“Any person who deliberately or maliciously sets a forest fire in New Jersey will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law,” Acting Chief of the Forest Fire Service Michael Drake said in a statement.

### **On the scene in Tabernacle**

April 9 was a busy day for the Forest Fire Service and local fire companies as they attempted to contain the vast blaze.

It quickly expanded from 30 acres to include 600, and then at its peak, 1,000 acres.

Chainsaw crews were out cutting down trees that could have caused the fire to strengthen. Many of the dead oak trees removed have been ravaged by gypsy moths in recent years, Achey said.

Spot fires were also set as a control, he said.

“It’s just never-ending right now,” he said around midday on Monday, April 9. “It’s very, very serious out there.”

While 25 homes were threatened, no property damage was sustained.

Achey urged homeowners to have 50 to 100 feet of defensible space around their homes.

Get brush away from the home, he said, as it’s a “key to protecting structures.”

According to Hajna, the area underwent a prescribed burn a few months ago, which is a controlled burn to prevent forest fires. It removes the fuel that burns the forest.

At 1 p.m. that day, the fire was announced to be 50 percent contained. By 8 a.m. on Tuesday, April 10, after crews had worked all night, it was 75 percent contained, said Achey.

By Wednesday, April 11, the fire was fully contained and under control, according to Sam Moore III, section forest fire warden and incident commander.

“We’re still doing extensive mop up each and every day,” Moore said. “Any smoke, any snag, we make sure it’s extinguished so it doesn’t get outside of our control line.”

The South Park fire was north of Chatsworth Road, east of Moores Meadow Road, east of South Park Road, and up to the peach farm, he said. It tied into Sooy Place Road, west of Johnson Place Road.

It encompassed parts of both Tabernacle and Woodland townships, he said.

Crews will be patrolling the area daily, he said, until adequate rainfall occurs.

“Meaning, a decent amount,” he said.

The only natural cause of a fire is lightning, Moore said, and the area had not had any that night, which makes the indicators and factors “definitely suspicious in nature,” but it was still under investigation as of Thursday, April 12.

### **Indian Mills on the scene**

Indian Mills Volunteer Fire Company was one of the local companies on the scene throughout the fire.

“We basically were supplying the forest fire service with water,” said Paul Miller, vice president of the company. “We have a large tanker truck. We were stationed on Route 532 at Moores Meadow Road. The forestry units were coming out of the woods and coming over to us and we were filling their small trucks.”

The company itself does not have trucks small enough to enter the woods, he said.

“After we emptied our tank out, we were running over to Leisuretown and refilling at a hydrant,” he said.

The process was then repeated.

Crews from Indian Mills were on the scene for 14 hours on Monday and 14 hours again on Tuesday, he said.

“The volunteer fire departments mostly support the forestry service,” he explained.

The company helped block properties from damages, he said.

Miller said the company hasn’t encountered too many forest fires this year – just some small brush fires that have sprouted.

“Most of the fires originate in the middle of Wharton State Forest,” he said.

Still, the day the fire started, while driving through the roads in the forest observing crews attacking the blaze, Achey explained, “People don’t realize this can happen in New Jersey. When this happens, it’s an eye-opener.”

If any residents have concerns or questions surrounding the fire, they should contact the forest fire service’s division B headquarters at (609) 726-9010.

### **Resources**

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

[www.nj.gov/dep](http://www.nj.gov/dep)

(866) 337-5669

National Interagency Fire Center

[www.nifc.gov](http://www.nifc.gov)

(208) 387-5512

National Weather Service Fire Weather

[radar.srh.noaa.gov/fire](http://radar.srh.noaa.gov/fire)

(609) 261-6600

State of New Jersey Forest Fire Service

[www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests/fire](http://www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests/fire)

(609) 726-9010