



VA'S 4 PM BURNING LAW GOES INTO EFFECT FEB 15, 2008 – OUTDOOR FIRES UNLAWFUL BEFORE 4:00 PM

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Montgomery County, Virginia – The Commonwealth's 4 p.m. Burning Law goes into effect Feb. 15, 2008 – the start of spring fire season in Virginia. This law prohibits burning before 4 p.m. each day (Feb. 15 – April 30) if the fire is in, or within 300 feet of, woodland, brushland or fields containing dry grass or other flammable materials.

A violation of this law is a Class 3 misdemeanor punishable by up to a \$500 fine. In addition to the criminal violation, 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.

“Because people are the cause of more than 94 percent of wildland fires in the Commonwealth, the 4 p.m. burning law may be one of the most effective tools we have in the prevention of wildfires,” said John Miller, director of resource protection at the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF). “Each late winter and early spring, downed trees, branches and leaves become ‘forest fuels’ that increase the danger of a forest fire. By adhering to the law and not burning before 4 p.m., people are less likely to start a fire that threatens them, their property and the forests of Virginia.”

In 2007, there were 1,509 wildfires that burned 11,200 acres of forest land in the Commonwealth. This was a 16 percent increase in the number of wildland fires compared to the number (1,301) of fires in 2006. While the number of fires was up, the amount of acreage burned actually dropped 19 percent when compared to 13,763 acres that burned in 2006. A total of 20 homes were damaged in 2007. This is a 43 percent increase over the number (14) that burned in 2006.

“If not for the suppression efforts of VDOF employees and local firefighters, 1,124 homes and other structures would have been damaged or destroyed by these wildfires,” said Miller.

Fred Turck, VDOF forest protection coordinator, said, “The leading cause of forest fires in Virginia is carelessness. An unattended fire, a discarded cigarette or a single match can ignite the dry fuels that are so prevalent in the early spring. Add a few days of dry, windy conditions and an escaped wildfire can quickly turn into a raging blaze.”

Of the 1,509 wildfires last year, 28.8 percent were caused by people burning debris or yard waste; 15 percent were arson; 11.8 percent were equipment use. Other causes included lightning, people smoking; children playing; railroads; campfires, and the rest were classified as miscellaneous causes.

Because of the continuing drought conditions and the areas affected over the last few years by hurricanes and tornadoes, this year's spring fire season is of particular concern to the Virginia Department of Forestry. In addition to creating more forest fuel, large numbers of downed trees and very dry conditions make firefighting more difficult and dangerous.

“People living in most rural areas of Virginia are especially at risk,” said Turck. “To take a quote from Smokey Bear, ‘Only You Can Prevent Wildfires.’”

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