



Do You Have What It Takes? A Forest Fire Prevention Program for Communities

Do you have what it takes? That is the question that the New Jersey Forest Fire Service is posing to numerous communities, homeowners associations and private property owners across the state. For New Jersey residents that live in wildfire prone areas such as the Pinelands region, the threat to life and property from a wildfire is a real concern. Studies show that a fast moving wildfire can destroy a home in only ten minutes.

In May 2007, New Jersey experienced one of its worst wildfires in recent memory. More than 15,000 acres were burned across several communities in Ocean County. The wildfire began south of Warren Grove and moved ferociously north and east, threatening thousands of residents in the townships of Barnegat, Stafford and Little Egg. The fire slammed into two residential developments along Route 72 and several homes were completely destroyed, with numerous other structures and homes damaged. Over 6,000 residents were evacuated and thankfully, no one was hurt.

As residential communities and development continue to spread into new, previously undisturbed natural areas, *Wildland Urban Interface* (WUI) - where rural land and developed areas meet - is created. Increased interface leads to greater ignition sources, more frequent fires and reduced ability to manage forest resources in these areas. For example, prescribed or controlled burning, a traditional method used by the Forest Fire Service to reduce forest fuels, becomes more precarious in the WUI where highly volatile fuels are in close proximity to development.



Left: Due to the 100' of defensible space around this Pinelands home, it survived a wildfire that damaged more than 15,000 acres in Warren Grove, New Jersey. Right: NJ Forest Fire Service fireman work to extinguish a blaze.

This problem can be seen throughout the country but especially in New Jersey with the state having such a rapidly growing population. In a study done by the American Planning Association, 46% of homes in New Jersey are located in the *Wildland Urban Interface*. That percentage ranks New Jersey in the top 5 nationally, and stresses the importance of the problem in New Jersey.

The Forest Fire Service is working with towns and other local and state government agencies to implement management programs that will create defensible space around communities. These areas of defensible space



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will utilize canopy thinning and mechanical means of reducing fuels, which will aid with future prescribed burning programs.

Residents can and should take an active role in protecting their home from wildfire. Simple measures such as those listed below can help create defensible space and provide a safer environment for you and your family.

- Use fire resistant or treated materials in new construction
- Keep clear access to your home and visible identification of your address
- Maintain landscape plantings and use appropriate plant selections
- Ensure your gutters, eaves and roof are clear of leaf litter and pine needles
- Take time now to discuss with your family the actions necessary to take during a wildfire emergency
- Post local firefighting agency telephone numbers in a visible location
- Decide on a meeting location and at least two routes of travel
- Have tools such as a rake, shovel, axe, saw and bucket readily available
- Maintain a water source and at least 100 feet of hose



With large developments, such as this one in Warren Grove, there is a shared community benefit in developing defensible space. Lack of adequate space between your home and flammable forest vegetation, especially in areas with frequent fire history such as the Pinelands, could be devastating in the event of a major wildfire.

Contact the New Jersey Forest Fire Service for more information about wildfire awareness and for a free “Do You Have What It Takes?” education kit. The kit contains a short, four-minute DVD that explains wildfire safety and defensible space, a bookmark with special tips and advice, and a guide to creating defensible space. To learn more, visit the New Jersey Forest Fire Service web site at www.njwildfire.org or call (609) 292-2977.