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## The State We're In by Michele S. Byers, Executive Director of NJCF



### State targets illegal dumpers in parks and forests

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It's a gorgeous day, you've arrived at your favorite park and are looking forward to a hike, some bird-watching, photography and soaking in the sights and sounds of nature. You've gone a short distance when you come across – yikes! - a pile of construction debris, an old refrigerator, bags of trash and other junk.

This scene is encountered by New Jersey outdoor lovers all too often. But it's one that the state is working to combat through a beefed-up enforcement and awareness campaign.

This month is the third anniversary of "Don't Waste Our Open Space," a coordinated effort launched by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection in response to increased dumping on the state's natural lands.

"Public lands all over New Jersey are being used as dumping grounds," according to the Department of Environmental Protection. "Litter, garbage bags, tires, televisions, electronic waste, appliances, yard waste and construction debris are being dumped and threatening our local environment, animals and public."

The state owns and manages more than 170 parks, forests, wildlife management areas and preserves on some 813,000 acres of open space in this state we're in.

Not only does illegal dumping mar the natural beauty of these lands, it can cost taxpayers a lot of money to clean up. It also jeopardizes public health when hazardous chemicals are dumped.

Since the start of the "Don't Waste Our Open Space" campaign, State Park Police and Division of Fish and Wildlife conservation officers have arrested more than 130 people. Investigations have been initiated in all 21 counties.

Those nabbed in the past year include a Mercer County man charged with dumping drums of dry-cleaning chemicals along the towpath at the Delaware & Raritan Canal State Park; a hauler who allegedly collected trash from a park site in Philadelphia and dumped it in a Gloucester County wildlife management area; and a Passaic County man accused of discarding a couch at Allamuchy Mountain State Park in Sussex County. Owners of abandoned boats, trailers, campers and motor vehicles have also been caught.

Technology is assisting in the crackdown, as State Park Police and conservation officers have installed motion-sensor cameras in strategic locations.

Citizens who love public lands and want to enjoy them in a clean and beautiful state can help by reporting dumping. "We welcome the additional eyes, ears and voices that our visitors provide," said Terri Genardi, chief of the State Park Police.

The Department of Environmental Protection has created an app to allow park visitors to take photos on their phones and submit them directly to enforcement officers. Visitors without smartphones can call 1-877-WARN-DEP to report possible violations.

An interactive map developed by the state shows where illegal dumping has occurred, who was charged with violations and how much they could pay in fines if found guilty. The map, the web app and other information can be viewed at <http://www.stopdumping.nj.gov/>.

In addition to the "Don't Waste Our Open Space" campaign, the Department of Environmental Protection is helping other government agencies in urban areas crack down on illegal dumping.

For example, the state has partnered with the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission to install surveillance cameras in its service area in Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Passaic and Union counties. As a result, numerous civil summonses have been issued and more are anticipated.

The Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission's efforts to curb dumping date to at least 1998, when it created a program that resulted in the removal of more than 12,000 tons of debris from Newark Bay, the Passaic River and its tributaries.

Hats off to the state for clamping down on illegal dumping! Hopefully, the combination of better surveillance, citizen assistance, more arrests and stiffer penalties will discourage would-be polluters from dumping their waste at taxpayer expense.