

## Meeting the Needs of Forest Fire Prevention in Wisconsin

### *An abbreviated history*

#### *History of fire control and fire prevention*

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Early attempts at organized forest fire control in Wisconsin began 1905 with the appointment of 249 town fire wardens. The fire wardens employed elements of fire prevention in their efforts by posting fire warnings and urging the public to be careful in their use of fire on the landscape. In 1911, organized forest protection began in earnest with the employment of 11 special fire wardens whose work was primarily focused on forest fire detection through the building of fire towers and hazard mitigation through the creation of fire lanes and fuelbreaks. The promotion of fire prevention occurred in 1915 when Wisconsin became the first state to use an airplane for locating fires, bringing much publicity to our state's fire control efforts. Spurred by many uncontrolled fires burning in 1925 and the resulting public interest, a law was passed which required a burning permit be written before anyone could set a fire in a protection district any time the ground was not snow-covered; wanton burning was curtailed and the public became more fire conscious. Fire prevention was amplified between 1930-40 when vehicle travel on fire lanes became more restrictive, ashtray were required in cars, and throwing burning tobacco or matches from vehicles was prohibited. State fire control became the responsibility of the newly created Department of Natural Resources in 1968. To this day, the state is mandated to protect the forest lands of the state through Wisconsin Statute 26.11, which states, *"The department is vested with power, authority, and jurisdiction in all matters related to the prevention, detection, and suppression of forest fires outside the limits of villages and cities in the state except as provided in s.26.01(2), and to do all things necessary in the exercise of such power, authority, and jurisdiction."*

#### *Forestry reviews of the fire control program*

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The DNR Bureau of Forestry conducted a three-phase study of forest fire control in the state from 1991-1994. A planning tool called "Levels of Protection" was developed as to prioritize and organize forest fire control programs (training, pre-suppression, prevention, and suppression) and resources (equipment and personnel) around the state. Specific recommendations regarding fire prevention were outlined, with objectives linked to training, partnerships, burning permits, arson investigation, and creating prevention plans based on fire causes and available partners.

Fifteen years later, the DNR Division of Forestry undertook another comprehensive study of its forest fire control program, again reviewing and making recommendations relative to each major program area. GIS technology allowed us to analyze fire risk by mapping vegetation, soils, and various human inputs. The information led to the creation of 16 "fire landscapes" that became the foundation for the allocation of resources and fire program activity levels across the state. The 2010 final report of the Fire Program Assessment identified fire prevention and the wildland urban interface as two programs recommended for enhancements in investment.

The recommendations of the Fire Program Assessment fed into the Division of Forestry's Strategic Direction (May 2011). Strategic Direction became the mechanism to reallocate resources at the Division level across all programs. Strategic Direction defined the Division's role in forest protection as one *"to prevent, detect and rapidly suppress wildland fires in areas of the state that have the greatest potential for significant loss of property, natural resources and even lives due to wildland fire."* The value of fire prevention was noted in particular with the determination that *"The Division will strengthen existing prevention and mitigation programs such as the wildland urban interface (WUI) program."* Strength has been realized in the form of the hiring of two full time equivalent employees in two of the highest risk fire landscapes to work with partners and homeowners to implement wildland fire education, vegetation management, and community planning efforts to mitigate wildfire risks. The WUI program being implemented in Wisconsin is in alignment and support of national programs that are being emphasized to reduce the impacts of forest fire in the wildland urban interface. Wisconsin is routinely successful in obtaining Federal grants that allow us and our partners to prepare for wildland fire in our state.

A strengthened forest fire prevention program has also been realized by the Strategic Direction recommendation that *"Prevention programs will be integrated into a Division-wide strategic plan for education and outreach and will be evaluated to understand the cost savings they provide by reducing the numbers of fires."* A result of this has been a focused prevention program that targets efforts based on causal agents and return on investment. A statewide fire prevention campaign is developed annually to deliver key messages through multiple information outlets and formats and focused on critical time periods when fire activity is occurring. The Great Lakes Forest Fire Compact is the primary partnership involved with the creation of campaign and messaging elements.

Fire prevention has evolved within Wisconsin's fire control program since its early beginnings. The implementation of recommendations created during thoughtful studies and program assessments over the years have resulted in greater public awareness of wildland fire, prevention methods, and individual and community preparedness measures. The Division's fire prevention and wildland urban interface programs are award-winning, nationally renowned programs that will continue to evolve with the natural environment and human dynamics associated with wildland fire.

For more information on any of the studies and assessments referenced here, please contact [Trent Marty](#), Forest Field Operations Bureau Director.