

## Wildfire

In the world of the professional fire fighter, the term “wildfire” has replaced the term “forest fire.” “Wildfire” is more descriptive of the wild, uncontrolled fires which occur in fields, grass and brush as well as in the forest itself. A stray spark can often ignite dried grass more easily than it can start a fire in the dried leaves of the forest floor. Once started, grass and brush fires can spread to adjacent forested land.

Brush and grass lands are an important part of the Commonwealth’s natural resources. They support many types of wildlife and some types of recreation, Grass and brush are also soil stabilizing ground cover which help to protect valuable soil from erosion. Frequently, these areas of low growing plants are the first stages in development of a future forest.

Most people believe the greatest danger of wildfire occurs during the summer. The large, dramatic wildfires burning in the western states draw attention from the national news media. Due to the dangerous conditions created by these large fires and the threat to life and property, the national fire prevention television campaign is in the summer.

Percentage of Wildfires occurring each month.



These campaigns have led most people to believe that Pennsylvania is most vulnerable to wildfires in the summer as well. Actually, our greatest danger of wildfires is in the spring months of March, April and May, and the autumn months of October and November. Another important difference between western wildfires and those in Pennsylvania is that a large percentage of the western fires are caused by summer ‘dry’ lightning storms. In Pennsylvania lightning-caused fires are relatively rare. **Ninety-eight percent of our wildfires are caused by people.**

### Why spring and fall months?

Certain conditions are necessary for a wildfire to occur.

**ONE**...An available fuel source, such as grasslands or fields.

**TWO**...Dry conditions, including the fuel source.

**THREE**...An ignition source — some way for the fire to start.

The first two factors occur most frequently in Pennsylvania during the spring and autumn. As winter slowly recedes and the sun climbs higher in the sky, the days become longer and warmer. The trees are bare during this time allowing the sunlight to reach the forest floor warming the ground and drying last fall’s leaves.

This, coupled with the fact that the winds in the spring are often very strong and dry, leads to a tremendous amount of fuel ready to burn.

During the fall, starting around October, the leaves turn color and begin to fall, accumulating in a deep fluffy layer that creates a fire hazard.

The third factor, ignition source, also occurs during these periods. *One of the major causes of forest fires in Pennsylvania is debris burning.* A careless person burning accumulated trash can be responsible for causing thousands of acres of valuable Pennsylvania forests to burn. These fires most frequently start in someone’s backyard and travel through the dead grass and weeds into the bordering woodlands.

### Always be careful with fire!

Regardless of the season, conditions often prevail that allow wildfires to start. Wildfires can occur in any month, at any time of the day, destroying valuable woodlands and wildlife habitat. Homes and buildings are threatened, not to mention the direct threat to human lives.

Wildfires can be prevented! The majority of forest fires in Pennsylvania can be stopped before they happen by being careful with the use of fire.

