

**New York State Office of Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation**

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Fire Management in State Parks and State Historic Sites

Effective November 6, 2007

BACKGROUND ON FIRE AND FIRE MANAGEMENT

Wildfires in New York State can be significant. From 1970 to 2005, the number of forest fires in New York State ranged between 73 and 895 annually, with an average of approximately 3,200 acres burned each year (NYS DEC 2007). One of the most notable wildfires in the State was the “Sunrise Fires” of 1995. This complex of major wildfires along Sunrise Highway on Long Island ultimately affected 7,000 acres of both private and public land in Suffolk County. State Park lands also experience wildfires each year. Local fire departments, the Department of Environmental Conservation, and State Parks share in response to these wildfires.

Fire management activities are essential for the protection of human life, personal property and irreplaceable natural and cultural resources. Fire management also has important bearing on the mission of State Parks. New York State Parks consists of over 350,000 acres of parkland. Ninety percent of this parkland is in a natural state; the remainder consists of valuable developed facilities. Both the natural and developed areas are subject to the effects of fire.

There are two main types of fire: wildfire and prescribed fire. Wildfires are unplanned fires ignited from natural or human sources and, in their initial stages, are uncontrolled. Wildfires most often occur in wildland areas but can occur in residential or other developed areas. Naturally ignited fire, such as from lightning, is a natural disturbance that can help sustain the ecological processes of natural systems. Fire-adapted and fire-dependent communities require periodic episodes of fire to maintain their integrity. Some of these fire-dependent community types, such as pitch pine barrens and maritime grasslands, can be found at Minnewaska State Park Preserve, Connetquot River State Park Preserve, and several other parks in the Palisades and Long Island Regions. These systems are at risk of losing their ecological integrity as the natural fire regime is suppressed due to human interference. Impacts from this interference may include: loss of habitat (by natural succession processes) for fire adapted/dependent plant and animal species, and vulnerability of the community or ecosystem to high intensity wildfires resulting from a build up of dense vegetation and accumulation of dead forest fuel.

There are two approaches to managing wildfires. The first is wildland fire suppression whereby trained crews of various sizes are deployed to suppress a fire. Protection of life (both the firefighters and civilians) is a top priority, while protection of property and other values are next. The second approach is referred to as Wildland Fire Use (WFU) which is the application of an

appropriate management response to a wildfire to accomplish specific resource management objectives within predefined areas.

Prescribed fires (or controlled burns) differ from wildfires in that they are deliberately set to accomplish specific resource management objectives in predefined areas and are set only under a carefully defined set of conditions. Prescribed fires maintain those unique fire-dependent habitats that need fire to survive while at the same time reduce hazardous fuels, thereby reducing the risk of subsequent high intensity wildfires. Both prescribed fires and WFU are based on the understanding that fire is often a natural process and can result in benefits to fire-dependent natural resources and in many cases lessen the impacts of a wildfire on facilities and developed areas.

GOALS OF FIRE MANAGEMENT ON NEW YORK STATE PARK LANDS

The following are ecological and operational goals for establishing a fire management program within New York State Parks:

- To assure the protection of people, facilities, and natural and cultural resources from the adverse effects of wildfire.
- To manage fuels to reduce the potential that wildfire that may threaten life and property.
- To maintain and restore biodiversity and ecological processes of fire adapted/dependent ecological communities.
- To protect and maintain historic landscapes.

POLICY

The purpose of this policy is to establish a framework by which OPRHP may develop a fire management program on State Park lands.

1. Fire management on State Park lands incorporates wildfire suppression, prescribed fire and wildland fire use.
2. All wildfires will be suppressed except those subject to wildland fire use protocols written within officially adopted fire management plans.
3. Safety of firefighters and the public is the first priority in all fire management activities.
4. Fire management in State Parks will be for the protection of people and facilities, and for the management of fire dependent natural resources.
5. The agency recognizes prescribed fire as an important management tool and will utilize it, when appropriate, in order to accomplish specific ecological and operational goals.

6. Prescribed fire programs within New York State Parks must be consistent with the mission of the agency and the protection of the resources and operations of the facility affected.
7. Fire management plans should be prepared for each facility (or group of facilities within a Parks region), as appropriate, for wildfire suppression, wildland fire use, and/or prescribed fire management.
8. Fire management plans for State Park facilities can be adopted from a regional planning effort provided that the plan addresses the needs for fire management within specific units of the park facilities and meets all environmental review and regulatory requirements. In such instance, upon its adoption, the region-wide plan shall serve as the facility fire management plan.
9. All fire management activities will be consistent with state and federal standards and guidelines, such as those established by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group, for all fire management activities.
10. The agency will maintain the highest standards of professional and technical expertise and training in planning and safely implementing an effective fire management program.
11. The agency will coordinate, collaborate and cooperate with other agencies and organizations, including the Department of Environmental Conservation, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and The Nature Conservancy, in order to establish and implement a fire management program on State Park lands.
12. All fire management activities must be performed in accordance with state and federal laws including: the Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Law (PRHPL), the Environmental Conservation Law (ECL), the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) and the Clean Air Act.

This policy is effective immediately, and restates the policy entitled “Fire Management in State Parks and Historic Sites” adopted November 6, 2007.

Dated: March 12, 2009



Carol Ash
Commissioner