

# Wildland Fire Causes in Virginia...

1. The improper or illegal burning of debris – **37 percent.**
2. Arson – **18 percent.**
3. Miscellaneous causes, such as fireworks, explosives, powerlines or undetermined – **15 percent.**
4. Discarded cigarettes and other smoking materials – **8 percent.**
5. Equipment use, such as lawn mowers, tractors, automobiles, chainsaws, etc. – **8 percent.**
6. Children (includes playing with matches/lighters and intentional fire setting) – **7 percent.**
7. Lightning (the only non-human cause of fires in Virginia) – **4 percent.**
8. Railroads (including hot brakes, exhaust particles, equipment failure and rail grinding) – **2 percent.**
9. Campfires (careless construction or leaving area before fire is dead-out) – **1 percent.**



## CONTACT INFORMATION

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Alleghany, Bath, Bedford, Bland, Botetourt, Buchanan, Carroll, Craig, Dickenson, Floyd, Franklin, Giles, Grayson, Henry, Highland, Lee, Montgomery, Patrick, Pulaski, Roanoke, Rockbridge, Russell, Scott, Smyth, Tazewell, Washington, Wise and Wythe counties

### Abingdon Office:

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VDOF P00141; 01/2009

## EVIDENCE PROTECTION

### *A First Responder's Guide for Wildland Fire Scenes*



Virginia Department of Forestry  
www.dof.virginia.gov

# PROTECT LIFE AND PROPERTY, PUT THE FIRE OUT AND SECURE THE SCENE

As a firefighter, your role in a wildland fire situation goes far beyond fire suppression. Because 95 percent of wildland fires in Virginia are human-caused, determining who started the fire and how it was ignited are just as important as making sure the fire gets extinguished. Often, this is a very difficult task due to the size, scope and environment involved.

With some wildland fires, the cause is truly accidental, but in many instances either negligence or malice are at the core. In all cases, the Virginia Department of Forestry is charged with determining the reason for the fire and the responsible party. You can make a real difference in helping to determine the origin and cause of a wildland fire by adhering to a few important principles:

1. Beginning with dispatch, take accurate and detailed notes.
2. Be observant while en-route to the fire.
3. Upon arrival, scan for clues or suspicious activity.
4. Conduct suppression operations.
5. Secure the area. You might be at a crime scene.

Let's look at each of these principles in depth.

## Dispatch

Always record the name, address and phone number of the person who reported the fire. Record the location of the fire. Ask the person if he or she knows how the fire started.

## En-route

Take note of the smoke conditions including color, amount, direction and any changes you see. Look for any vehicles leaving the area and record the make, model, color, license plate number, state, number of occupants, visible damage or other identifying markings, direction and speed of travel.

## Upon Arrival

As you assess the fire situation, do a quick scan of the area and look for gates that are either open or closed. If you notice any tire or footwear impressions on the roads or trails, make sure you protect them. Are there other items at or near the scene that seem out of place? If so, protect them as well. Are there people or vehicles nearby? Again, make notes of who and what you see.

## Suppression

From the very start of your fire suppression efforts, plan to protect the point of origin. Leave the area as undisturbed as possible. Concentrate your suppression efforts on the perimeter of the wildland fire – ensuring life and property are protected – and leave the interior to burn out.



## Secure the Area

Once you've protected life and property, your next priority is to secure and search the origin area. Some fires are relatively easy to determine how they started, yet others are very difficult. Any and all evidence – no matter how minor or insignificant it may appear to you – could be crucial in determining who started the fire and how it was started.

Post security personnel and tape off the area if necessary. Look for and protect physical evidence that is inside or outside the area of origin. But, please, do not pick up or touch any evidence as doing so will contaminate it. Report your finds to the lead investigator, and keep the details of the investigation confidential – anything you say could negatively impact the case.

As you can see, you are an important member of the team effort that is needed to determine the cause and origin of wildland fires in the Commonwealth. Always do your part to ensure the investigation is a success. The citizens of Virginia deserve no less, and they very much appreciate all that you do on their behalf.



**95% of all wildfires in Virginia are caused by humans**