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Spring Fire Season Begins, 4 PM Law in Effect

In Virginia, spring brings increased wildfire potential and a greater threat for escaped fires. Virginia's spring wildland fire season and accompanying 4 PM Burning Law officially begin Monday, February 15. The law prohibits burning before 4 p.m. each day between February 15 and April 30 if the fire is in, or within 300 feet of woodland, brush or fields containing dry grass or other flammable materials. In addition to being tended at all times, fires started after 4 p.m. should not have additional material added to the burn after midnight. If weather conditions become critical, localities often add further restrictions to outdoor burning at the town, city, and county levels. So, be sure to check with your local officials before burning.

Ninety-five percent of wildland fires in Virginia are human-caused. The majority of escaped fires result from people burning debris, such as accumulated brush piles or trash, on dry and windy days. Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF) officials emphasize that citizens should take extreme caution, even within the bounds of the law, to ensure they are burning safely. Keep your piles small, remove anything burnable from within 10 feet of your pile or burn barrel, and have water and a shovel or rake nearby.

Why 4 p.m. and why in the spring? During the spring, burning conditions become incredibly conducive to fire spread due to increased and erratic winds, drying of fuels (such as leaf litter) that are dormant this time of year, and lower humidity. As the days start to become warmer, radiant energy from the sun shining down on dry grass, dead leaves and other materials, further dries out existing fuels, making them a tinderbox. What may start out as a small fire can quickly escape and grow into a wildfire that engulfs hundreds, if not thousands, of acres. After 4 p.m., winds tend to decrease and the moisture in the air and fuels increases, lessening the potential for fires to escape.

VDOF's Assistant Director of Fire and Emergency Response, Dave Houttekier said, "The 4 PM Burning Law is one of the most effective tools we have to prevent wildfires." Emphasizing the importance of the regulation he added, "By adhering to the law and not burning before 4 p.m., people are less likely to start a fire that threatens

them, their property, and the forests of Virginia.” Starting a fire before 4 p.m. is not only dangerous, it can be costly. Individuals found violating the 4 PM law can be charged with a class 3 misdemeanor, which carries a fine of up to \$500. In addition, if the fire escapes, that individual will be responsible for the suppression costs associated with putting the fire out and any damage to other people’s property as a result of the fire.

Although conditions do not predict an intense fire season, especially with the recent snow, the potential for fire can come and go in the spring. Just a few days of dry weather can allow light fuels, such as grass, to become receptive even after long periods of wet weather.

The primary prevention message remains consistent throughout the entire season: springtime in Virginia always brings the potential for wildland fires. Although fire officials do what they can to plan for fire while actively promoting prevention and being prepared for suppression, the citizens of the Commonwealth play the most significant role by being safe and legal with all fire.

Virginia State Forester Rob Farrell said “The beginning of the 4 PM Burning Law is a great reminder that some of the best ways people can help in wildfire prevention are to wait till after 4 p.m. to burn, choose the right weather for outdoor fires, and clear an area surrounding the burn of flammable material before burning. Being smart, legal and responsible with fire really and truly is the answer.”

If you’re unsure if burning is legal or safe please call your local forester for recommendations based on your area’s fire danger conditions. For more information on wildland fire in Virginia, please visit: <https://www.dof.virginia.gov/fire/>

About the Virginia Department of Forestry

The Virginia Department of Forestry protects and develops healthy, sustainable forest resources for Virginians. With nearly 16 million acres of forestland and more than 108,000 Virginians employed in forestry, forest products and related industries, Virginia forests provide an overall economic output of more than \$21 Billion annually. Headquartered in Charlottesville, the Agency has forestry staff members assigned to every county to provide citizen service and public safety protection across the Commonwealth, which it’s been doing now for more than 100 years. VDOF is an equal opportunity provider.