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Brush Fires in Connecticut: Be Aware, Be Prepared

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In many parts of Connecticut stretches of warm, breezy weather with little rainfall can be the norm. While these conditions may seem typical and easy to take for granted in daily routines, they can become especially concerning during the spring season (before leaves have fully emerged), as well as during the autumn months (as dry leaves fall and accumulate). Drying leaves create a blanket of combustible material across landscapes. The combination of dry fuels and windy conditions increases the risk of forest and brush fires in both rural and suburban areas. Similar dry conditions are uncommon but possible during other months and can also lead to brush fires.

Forests will tolerate small brush fires, adapt readily, and be okay, for the most part. But these days more people living in close proximity to the woods in Connecticut leads to the potential danger to homes and structures, and risk of injury. Creating what are called defensible spaces, meant to lessen the amount of vegetation around buildings, will help to lessen the impact.



Satellite imagery shows that about 75% of the land area of Connecticut is under a tree canopy of some sort. Trees and forests are the natural vegetative cover. Most of the time conditions are humid and damp enough among the trees and woodlands that fire is only an occasional concern. Local fire companies and departments, and state fire control officials do a good job of protecting when situations require it. But some seasons are unusual, with every part of the forest dry. Additionally, combustible material, not just leaves but also larger material, is widespread throughout the region. There have been a large number of small brush fires in recent years, along with a few larger ones, and these strain the collective capacity of the state and region's fire protection infrastructure.

During conditions conducive to brush fires, the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) will implement an outdoor burning ban; this means no campfires, grills or open flames are permitted on state forests and parks. Many local municipalities will similarly set ban periods. But public lands constitute only a fraction of the wooded area of the state. Elevating personal awareness about the risks of fire, how to protect structures, humans and animals, and how to avoid an accidental ignition, goes a long way to decreasing risks.

The obvious open-fire potential ignition sources such as gas and charcoal grills, wood stoves, indoor and outdoor fireplaces, smoking materials (of all types), and flame-weeders, among others, are common issues.

A heightened awareness, however, will reveal some less obvious sources of heat and sparks. Some everyday activities such as the operation of certain tools and small equipment, generally are low risk for fire much of the year when dampness generally permeates leaves, grass, and brush. But under extreme conditions, and periods without rainfall, anything that might make a spark can be a potential danger.

For example, metal-working tools, like drills and grinders, can generate sparks. Accidentally dropping a heavy steel item onto a stone can create a spark. Equipment with small motors (dirt bikes, lawnmowers, leaf blowers, ATVs, etc.), if not equipped with a spark arrestor, can be dangerous. Most modern chain saws are equipped with spark arrestors by law, but older chain saws might not be equipped with spark arrestors. Look for a small-mesh screen at the exhaust outlet. A moment to consider heat and spark potential, and surrounding combustible material, can avoid a potential tragedy.

People who live in high fire-prone areas, such as in some areas in the Western United States learn to create a 'defensible space' around homes and outbuildings. This includes the removal of dead trees, limbs, and shrubs, keeping grass short, and removing fallen leaves and other combustible debris for a 20- to 30-foot radius around structures. Raking fallen leaves away from the house and garage is a good idea, even if they can't all be disposed of at once. Wooden ladders, unused lumber, posts, and poles can all be sources of flame transfer to a building if left leaning against the wall. Fuel cans, spray-paint containers, propane tanks, cooking and motor oil, and various other combustible liquids need to be stored in secure locations.

Historically, relatively frequent low-intensity fires were a common occurrence in the upland forests. But modern Connecticut has more people living in close proximity to the woods than ever before, and the potential danger is to homes and structures and risk of injury. Therefore, adopting defensible space strategies can go a long way to guarding against dangerous conditions that could fuel a brush fire.

For more information: <https://portal.ct.gov/deep/forestry/forest-fire/fire-prevention-and-control>

Resources

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