

One careless match...Yours ?



Remember - Only you can 
PREVENT FOREST FIRES!

U. S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

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NATION-WIDE COOPERATIVE FOREST FIRE PREVENTION CAMPAIGN
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New York State Conservation Dept.

Happy 65th Birthday, SMOKEY BEAR

By Ellen Bidell

Most of us remember the slogan **“Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires.”**

That famous saying has been Smokey Bear’s mantra for nearly all of the 65 years the big bear in a ranger hat has been reminding us about the dangers of careless behavior in the forest.

Smokey’s beginnings date back to 1944, when illustrator Albert Staehle created the image of Smokey Bear pouring a bucket of water on a campfire with the caption “Smokey says—Care will prevent 9 out of 10 forest fires.” But the fire prevention awareness campaign actually began several years earlier during WWII. In the spring of 1942, a Japanese submarine surfaced off southern California and fired a barrage of shells at an oil field in Santa Barbara, near the Los Padres National Forest. Since most experienced fire fighters were involved in the war effort, there were limited resources to fight forest fires. This caused the public to become concerned that another incendiary shell could spark a raging blaze. In response, the U.S. Forest Service created a public awareness campaign, using slogans like “Don’t Aid the Enemy,” and “Our Carelessness, Their Secret Weapon.”

However, a common cause of forest fires wasn’t enemy shells or bombs—it was (and often still is) children. The Advertising



Council believed the way to reach children might be through the image of a cute forest animal. At the time, Walt Disney’s 1942 motion picture “Bambi” was garnering a lot of attention. Disney agreed to lend Bambi’s image to the Advertising Council for their forest fire prevention effort. The campaign was a huge success. However, since Bambi was on loan from Disney

for only a year, the Forest Service needed to create its own icon, and the image of Smokey was born.

The real live Smokey Bear appeared six years later during a forest fire in the Lincoln National Forest in the Capitan Mountains of New Mexico. The fire was spreading rapidly, and forest rangers, personnel from a nearby Army base, staff from the New Mexico Game Department, and civilian volunteers were called in to assist. Twenty-four of the brave firefighters were trapped in the fire’s path, and lay down on a rock-slide for more than an hour to escape the scorching heat and flames. They emerged from the ordeal unharmed, but noticed a small bear cub that had taken refuge in a tree that was directly in the path of the fire. His hind legs were badly burned and his mother was nowhere to be found. The firefighters nicknamed him “Hotfoot Teddy” and brought him to receive veterinary care.

Hotfoot Teddy soon became a national phenomenon, and the New Mexico game warden offered the cub to the Forest Service with the understanding that the bear would help publicize fire prevention and conservation. Hotfoot Teddy became Smokey Bear and went to live at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. He passed away twenty-six years later and is buried at the Smokey Bear Historical Park in Capitan, New Mexico.

Smokey's image continues to convey the fire prevention message to children and adults alike.

DEC forest rangers visit many elementary schools each year with a life-sized Smokey Bear in tow. Smokey also makes regular appearances in parades, fairs and special functions.

More than 100,000 wildfires start each year because of careless human behavior.

Over the years, however, Smokey's message and image have evolved somewhat to reflect the times. About five years ago, the official slogan was changed from "Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires" to "Only You Can Prevent Wildfires." The Forest Service wanted people to know that there are more than just forests at risk, there are also fire threats to prairies, grasslands and rangelands. In fact, wildfires claim an area nearly equal to the size of New Hampshire every year. And while the acreage of burned forest has decreased from 22 million acres in 1944 to 5 million acres in 2008, the incidence of wildfires is on the rise, at a cost of billions of dollars annually.

In recent years, Smokey's message of fire prevention has taken an interesting twist—Smokey now informs us that some forest fires are okay. Prior to this, Smokey's message was that all forest fires are bad. But fire professionals want to



The icon of forest fire prevention for 65 years, Smokey Bear continues to convey the fire prevention message to children.

change the public perception of fire in our forests. Now, wildfire professionals make a distinction between good and bad fires. Fires set intentionally by professionals under controlled conditions, to manage ecosystems or reduce fuel loads are called prescribed fires. Fires which start accidentally or by natural causes such as lightning strikes, but are allowed to burn under specific conditions are

called natural prescribed fires.

Scientists now understand that fire plays a major role in many ecosystems. Some species, such as the pitch pine found in the Albany Pine Bush and the Long Island Pine Barrens, require periodic fires to open seed cones and to allow regeneration of the species. Fire also enhances woodland diversity by allowing different plant species to take



While many forest fires are bad, some are set by fire professionals in controlled situations. These kinds of prescribed fires can help manage ecosystems and allow for greater biological diversity.

the place of formerly large, homogenous stands of mature trees.

One hundred years of total fire suppression have resulted in accumulations of forest fuels—dead trees, fallen branches and heavy leaf litter—on the forest floor. These conditions can lead to more intense fires, which are difficult to control and cause more damage to forest ecosystems than do lower intensity fires. Between 2004 and 2007, the number of acres burned due to wildfire each year was nearly double the national annual average of 4.6 million acres, despite there being ten

thousand fewer fires. In addition, more and more people are building homes at the forest edge, resulting in property value losses in the hundreds of millions in the event of a wildfire. Some larger fires have caused property loss of more than \$1 billion.

Some “bad” wildfires are unintentionally caused by humans. They generally start where wild land meets suburban or urban areas, and endanger property of high value. These fires ignite in the absence of firefighters, allowing the fire to expand and grow more intense, making suppression

more difficult. Typically, these fires are caused by burning trash, unattended campfires, barbecue or woodstove coals and ashes, careless discarding of cigarettes, children playing with matches, arson, and outdoor machinery operating without spark arrestors. More than 100,000 wildfires start each year because of careless human behavior.

Smokey Bear knows that many of these wildfires are preventable, and asks each of us to stop and think about our behavior. At 65, Smokey has no intention of retiring. He remains committed to continue educating the public about the dangers of fire, and reminds us that “Only You Can Prevent Wildfires.”

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ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT WILDFIRES.
www.smokeybear.com