

Forest Fire Service

Critical Issue - Full Time Personnel Staffing Needs

Issue Summary – 21 critical full time positions within the Forest Fire Service are currently vacant, resulting in the delivery of reduced public safety services for the protection of life, property and natural resources from wildfire across New Jersey. Current statewide Forest Fire Service staffing is at 76 %.

Out of the current reduced staffing of 68 positions, 30 have over 20 years of service (20 to 35 years) and 12 of those individuals are eligible to currently retire or have announced a retirement date.

Agency Background - The New Jersey Forest Fire Service is the state agency responsible for protecting life, property and natural resources from the threat of wildfire across New Jersey as mandated by N.J.S.A. Title 13, the Forest Fire Laws. This area of protection encompasses over 3.2 million acres of land consisting of the rural and suburban portions of New Jersey. The Forest Fire Service has a full time staff of 89 permanent positions (currently at 68) and a part time staff of over 2,500 wildland firefighters that are paid on an hourly basis as required for emergency fire suppression and fire protection duties.

On average the Forest Fire Service responds to and controls 1,600 wildfires annually across New Jersey. The number and severity of these wildfires is directly related to weather, fuels, human risk and the effectiveness of a forest fire control organization. The total effectiveness of the forest fire control organization depends on two major factors: personnel and mechanized equipment.

The Forest Fire Service relies on a network of 21 forest fire lookout towers that provide quick detection of all wildfires and a fleet of over 400 pieces of equipment that include specially armored off road wildland engines and bulldozers with plow units, as well as observation and drop helicopters that can be dispatched to all reported wildfires in an expedient manner. During the spring fire season an additional fleet of single engine air tankers are contracted to supplement the aerial firefighting force.

In addition to fire suppression, the Forest Fire Service must perform numerous other duties, including the investigation of wildfire causes and the enforcement of N.J.S.A. Title 13, the training of Forest Fire Service firefighters as well as other emergency responders across New Jersey, fire prevention and homeowner education through the use of the national Smokey Bear and Firewise educational programs, as well as various aspects of wildland fire protection preparedness responsibilities. The implementation of the State's fuels management program is a highly labor-intensive process that includes the planning for and execution of a prescribed burning program that treats over 15,000 acres annually. We are also responsible for the maintenance of hundreds of miles of firelines, firebreaks, and fuelbreaks across New Jersey. This process reduces the severity of wildfires and allows for the quicker response to, containment and control of fires that occur in some of the highest hazard areas of the state.

New Jersey's Fire Problem - New Jersey's unique geographical and economic position make it an optimum place to work and live. The state has over 8.7 million residents in its 8,721 square mile area, making New Jersey the most densely populated state in the nation. Over 50 % of the state is currently forested with developed areas and individual residences increasingly spreading into forested regions. The spread of urbanization into forested regions is known as the wildland urban interface and is defined as the line, area or zone where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildlands or vegetative fuel. These resulting wildland urban interface areas pose significant challenges to the New Jersey Forest Fire Service in providing forest fire protection.

Most people across the United States equate wildland urban interface fires with the western portion of the nation, but the potential for significant wildfire activity that threatens human lives and improved property is a reality in New Jersey. Across New Jersey, any person who lives in a wildland urban interface area is at risk of being threatened or impacted by a wildfire. Some portions of New Jersey, such as the Pinelands National Reserve and surrounding Pine Barrens region, are more susceptible to serious wildfire occurrences than other areas based on their volatile forest fuels, topographic features, weather patterns and the prevalence of the wildland urban interface encountered there.

The potential for a wildfire disaster in these areas has been drastically illustrated numerous times. Large conflagrations have occurred several times from 1930 to 1977 and most recently in 2007. In 1995, one fire in Ocean County burned 19,225 acres of Pine Barrens forests and a 1997 wildfire burned 800 acres, damaged 52 homes and threatened over 300 homes in Berkeley Township, Ocean County. In 2001, the Jakes Branch wildfire burned over 1,277 acres, destroyed one home, damaged 35 homes and buildings and forced the extended closure of the Garden State Parkway impacting traffic throughout the tri state area on a summer Sunday afternoon. The most notable of New Jersey wildland urban interface wildfires was on the weekend of April 20 – 21, 1963, when a conflagration of wildfires consumed 190,000 acres of forestland, destroyed 186 homes and 197 buildings and were responsible for the loss of seven civilian lives. The damage to improved property was estimated at over 8.5 million dollars. The wildfires of 1963 are often cited as a benchmark for fire protection comparisons across the United States.

Current Situation - In May of 2007, New Jersey experienced a serious wildfire conflagration which burned over 15,550 acres of forest, destroyed 3 homes, damaged 25 homes, closed major transportation networks, injured several firefighters and local residents and evacuated thousands of residents from Southern Ocean County. During the course of containing and controlling the Warren Grove Wildfire, a total of over 9,000 homes were threatened, at one point or another, by the growth of the fire. This wildfire occurred in the Pine Barrens area known as the East Plains which is considered one of the most volatile vegetation types in the nation. Forest Fire Service resources and full time employees from across the state were mobilized and assigned to aggressively and safely confront the fire on an around the clock basis for over a 48 hour period until the fire was contained while still providing fire protection and public safety services to the remainder of New Jersey. Manpower and equipment were mobilized from High Point to Cape May. The wildfire was not considered 100 % under control for an additional twenty days with constant monitoring by firefighters and specialized equipment. Luckily only one major wildfire occurred in New Jersey on that day and the overall efforts of the Forest Fire Service did not have to be diverted to any additional emerging incidents. Historically, when conditions occur that

promote large fire growth, the state has experienced several major and complex wildfires concurrently.

The full time work force needs adequate staffing to be able to safely operate the overall firefighting organization across the geographical features and ever increasing wildland urban interface areas from the Pine Barrens to the Highlands.

Staffing Needs & Firefighter Safety - The stage is currently set for the possibility of the occurrence of a series of major catastrophic wildfires (both large and small due to high fire occurrence) in New Jersey based on the presence of hazardous wildland fuels, the continued development of homes and improved property into expanding wildland urban interface areas and the historical potential for human caused wildfires. The impact of urbanization is clearly demonstrated in that 99 % of all wildfires occurring in New Jersey are caused by human activity, either intentionally or accidentally.

Funding needs to be provided to fill critical positions that are vacant. These critical positions include front line firefighters and managers as well as integral support positions that detect wildfires, provide dispatch and communications as well as keep the firefighting vehicle and specialized equipment fleet operational. All vacant positions are an integral part of the overall statewide forest fire suppression and protection program that operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Continued reduced staffing levels present firefighter safety issues and may cause firefighters to take unnecessary risks while protecting life, property and natural resources from wildfire. The safety of our firefighters is and needs to continue to be our primary priority in confronting wildfires throughout New Jersey.

In 1998, The National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety (NIOSH) was mandated by Congress to create a Fire Fighter Fatality Investigation and Prevention Program. A report released by NIOSH in 2008, which investigated 372 firefighter fatalities nationwide between 1998 and 2005, identified ten recommendations for preventing firefighter fatalities. Of these ten recommendations, providing adequate staffing was identified as a key factor in preventing firefighter fatalities.

Currently there are 21 vacancies out of a total of 89 positions allocated to the Forest Fire Service. The current staffing level is at an unacceptable 76 % for providing these critical public safety services. One of our most recent retirements was of the Section Firewarden who served as the Warren Grove Wildfire Incident Commander, who retired after thirty years of service, leaving this critical vacancy in an extremely hazardous portion of the Pine Barrens. These retirements not only reduce our capability to respond to emergencies, but also remove valuable experience that requires several years to replace. The vacant positions are broken out below by geographical division and program responsibilities.

Division A (Northern New Jersey – Highlands and Skylands Areas)

(1) **Assistant Division Forest Firewarden** (key leadership position overseeing field operations, law enforcement, training, prevention – supervises 8 Section Forest Firewardens)

(3) **Section Forest Firewardens** (field fire managers that oversee an administrative section, overseeing all aspects of fire management and fire protection – 597,000 acres are currently lacking oversight)

(1) **Customer Service Representative** (assists in the administration of a division headquarters and interacts with the general public for an eight county area with fire prevention, information and permitting)

(2) **Forest Fire Observers** (provide fire detection duties at Ramapo and Budd Lake Fire Lookout Towers – 628 square miles are currently lacking early wildfire detection)

(1) **Forest Fire Equipment Maintenance Specialist 1** (responsible for the maintenance and construction of forest firefighting vehicles and specialized equipment, supports firefighting activities)

Division B (Central New Jersey – core of the Pinelands National Reserve)

(2) **Forest Fire Observers** (provide fire detection duties at Jamesburg and Apple Pie Fire Lookout Towers – 628 square miles are currently lacking early wildfire detection)

(2) **Section Forest Firewarden** (field fire managers that oversees an administrative section, overseeing all aspects of fire management and protection – 229,000 acres are currently lacking oversight)

Division C (Southern New Jersey – Pinelands Region)

(1) **Assistant Division Forest Firewarden** (key leadership position overseeing field operations, law enforcement, training, prevention – supervises 11 Section Forest Firewardens)

(1) **Supervisor of Forest Fire Equipment Maintenance** (supervises the operation of the division shop and oversight of the maintenance and construction of fire vehicles and specialized equipment)

(2) **Section Forest Firewardens** (field fire managers that oversee an administrative section, overseeing all aspects of fire management and fire protection – 259,000 acres are currently lacking oversight)

(2) **Forest Fire Observers** (provide fire detection duties at Millville and McKeetown Fire Lookout Towers – 628 square miles are currently lacking early wildfire detection)

State Headquarters/Aviation & FEPP Program/Equipment Research and Development

(1) **Forest Fire Equipment Maintenance Specialist** (assigned to the daily operation of the FEPP program –current NJ inventory is over 21 million \$\$ of supplies, equipment and vehicles on loan to NJ)

(1) **Intermittent Forest Fire Equipment Maintenance Specialist** (assigned to the R&D shop for the construction and fabrication of specialized firefighting equipment and vehicles, supports firefighting)

(1) **Division Forest Firewarden** (key leadership position overseeing the statewide hazard reduction, fireline payroll, contract aviation, weather, District Firewarden, and fire planning programs)