

Massachusetts Fire Officials Ask for Public's Help Preventing Brush Fires

State Fire Marshal Peter J. Ostroskey said, "Early spring is typically the time when firefighters are busy fighting brush fires. As the season changes, the winds can be strong and unpredictable." He added, "Please conduct open burning safely and watch the wind. Have a permit and to be ready to shut it down quickly if the weather changes."

Historically April Is the Worst Month for Brush Fires Due to Open Burning

Historically April is the worst month for brush fires. Many people rush to conduct open burning before the season ends on May 1 and may burn too much at once. Spring is typically a windy time of the year as the weather pattern changes. The snow pack has melted, but the ground is only just starting to green up and there is plenty of dry vegetation and leaves from last year to serve as tinder. Dry, hot and windy conditions make it perfect for brush fires to start and to get out of control, and hard for firefighters to bring them under control.

Don't Delay; Call for Help

If the fire should get out of control, call the fire department immediately. "Winds can fan the flames and fire can spread faster than a person can run," said Ostroskey. "Use the utmost caution to prevent injury and damage to your own and your neighbor's property," he added.

Low Number of 2019 Brush Fires Not Likely to be Repeated

"Due to the wet spring, 2019 had the second lowest number of brush fires on record; we are not likely to be so lucky in 2020," said Ostroskey. "The spring brush fire season has

already started.” The 5-year average number of brush fires (2015-2019) is 5,065. In 2019, there were only 2,705 brush fires in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Fire Incident Reporting System (MFIRS) collects data on grass fires, brush fires, wildland fires, woods fires and other outside natural vegetation fires and we refer to them as “brush fires”.

Brush Fires Tax Firefighting Resources

Brush fires are labor intensive and take a long time to bring under control. Multiple brush fires can severely tax a community’s firefighting resources. Prevention is the best approach.

Learn to Conduct Open Burning Safely

Open burning that has gotten out of control is the cause of many brush fires. Open burning season, in communities where it is allowed, ends on May 1. A permit is required from the local fire warden, usually the local fire chief. Burning can only take place when both air quality and fire conditions are acceptable. “Weather conditions change rapidly, so watch the wind and be prepared to extinguish your brush pile. A sudden wind change is how most open burning fires get out of control,” said Ostroskey.

Open burning is prohibited at all times in these communities: Arlington, Belmont, Boston, Brookline, Cambridge, Chelsea, Chicopee, Everett, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Malden, Medford, New Bedford, Newton, Somerville, Springfield, Waltham, Watertown, West Springfield, Worcester.

State fire wardens determine each day whether conditions are safe for open burning. Weather and air quality can change rapidly, especially in the spring, and fire departments can rescind permits when that happens. Follow local procedures for using the permit on any given day.

How to Safely Burn Brush

- Burn between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. with a

permit from the fire warden (usually the fire chief).

- Burn only when air quality is acceptable for burning. Local authorities will call the MassDEP Air Quality Hotline at (800) 882-1497 or visit MassAir Online to find out if it is.
- Burn only on your own property as close as possible to the source of material to be burned, no less than 75 feet away from all dwellings and away from utility lines.
- Have fire suppression tools handy; keep a fire extinguisher or charged garden hose, and a shovel and a rake close by.
- An adult must constantly monitor the fire. Leaving burning unattended is a reason to revoke burning permits.
- Use paper and kindling to start a fire and progressively add larger pieces of wood. Parts of a leftover Christmas tree may also be used.
- Never use gasoline, kerosene or any other flammable liquid to start a fire. The risk of injury in these cases is too high.
- Burn one small pile at a time and slowly add to it. This will help keep the fire from getting out of control.
- Burn the fire down to the coals, drown them with water, spread them out, and then drown them again. Completely extinguish the fire before leaving.