

# Chapter 4: Preventing and Managing Wildfires

Fighting wildfires was the Division of Forestry's first job when it was established as the Minnesota Forest Service in 1911. It has remained an important part of our work ever since.

DNR Forestry works with other public agencies to protect 45 million acres of land—and the people who live there—from wildfire. We help prevent wildfires from starting and suppress wildfires when they do occur. We allow some wildfires to burn if they don't threaten people or property. We even deliberately set fires under controlled conditions to mimic the natural renewing force of fire in certain habitats. But our overarching concern is to protect people and property.

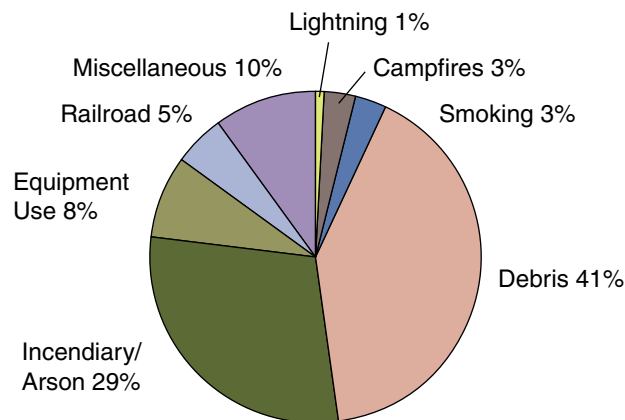
## Wildfire Prevention

We strive to prevent wildfires through a combination of education, regulation, and enforcement. We provide information to homeowners on minimizing risk of loss due to wildfire. We also provide free materials for teaching children about wildfire prevention.

Regulation of open burning and the use of burning permits are also important for preventing wildfires. By prohibiting open fires during high-risk times, we reduce the likelihood that such fires will burn out of control. (Burning permits are required for most open fires in Minnesota—see sidebar.)

Finally, law enforcement is sometimes needed when people disregard the law or set fires that endanger their neighbors.

**Causes of Wildfires, 1993–2002**



Source: DNR Division of Forestry

**Burning Permits.** Helping prevent wildfires in Minnesota are some 2,000 dedicated volunteer township fire wardens throughout the state. To help reduce the risk of wildfire, DNR requires burning permits for most open fires (except for campfires, contained fires, fires in approved burners under certain circumstances, and fires on snow-covered ground). The permits help us keep track of where controlled fires are burning, provide a mechanism for restricting fires in times of high fire danger, and help us educate citizens about proper burning procedures. Fire wardens issue more than 70,000 burning permits each year.

Each year in Minnesota we fight an average of 1,500 fires, which together burn some 30,000 to 35,000 acres of land.

**The Minnesota Interagency Fire Center (MIFC), located in Grand Rapids, coordinates state, local, and federal firefighting efforts. The center assembles crews to fight fires as they arise and manages equipment, from shovels to helicopters, needed by firefighters. MIFC serves as firefighting equipment headquarters for 20 northeastern states. It also serves as the central distribution center for the Smokey Bear, Woodsy Owl, and Junior Ranger programs.**

**Firewise Minnesota**, a statewide fire-risk mitigation program instituted in 2001, supports local efforts to assess fire danger and help property owners reduce dangerous fuel accumulations and possible wildfire damage. Homeowners and communities that use Firewise principles and practices greatly increase the chance their property will survive a wildfire. Firewise also funds projects that aid firefighting, such as installing emergency water sources and improving street signage. As of early 2004, the program had provided grants to more than 100 communities, shipped Firewise homeowners kits to some 350 homeowners, and provided on-the-ground Firewise assessments of wildfire risk to more than 7,000 homes. To learn more or to order a Firewise homeowners kit, see [www.dnr.state.mn.us/firewise](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/firewise) or call the DNR Information Center at 651-296-6157 or 888-646-6367.



**Buddy, can you spare a fire truck?**

The federal government often can. Through the Federal Excess Property Program, DNR Forestry helps Minnesota fire departments procure firefighting equipment such as trucks, track vehicles, and fire hoses on loan from the federal government.

DNR Forestry also sells equipment for fighting wildfires to rural fire departments at cost. The program provides assistance to some 160 fire departments each year.

**Fire Control**

DNR Forestry trains firefighters, monitors fire-related weather conditions, watches for fires through aerial surveillance, and develops plans for handling various wildfire situations. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, firefighters are ready to go when a fire starts. Three airport bases for water-dropping air tankers provide resources for fighting fires from the air. During the fire season, helicopters with large water buckets are on alert throughout the state. Through the Minnesota Incident Command System (MNICS), an interagency partnership, we participate in coordinated firefighting efforts, dispatching personnel and equipment as needed. When wildfires rage in



Photo: Boyd Barrott

### Happy Birthday, Smokey Bear!

Smokey Bear, America's wildfire prevention icon, turned 60 in 2004. The U.S. Forest Service created Smokey in 1944 to help publicize citizens' role in preventing wildfires. Today DNR Forestry offers a Smokey Bear puppet show, an electronic quiz game, posters, and activity books to help teach children about fire safety. To learn more, see [www.dnr.state.mn.us/education/wildfire](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/education/wildfire) or call the DNR Information Center at 651-296-6157 or 888-646-6367.



**Helping the Volunteers.** DNR Forestry administers a grant program that provides funds for establishing and coordinating volunteer fire departments in communities with fewer than 10,000 residents. More than \$4 million has been disbursed to some 800 fire departments since 1975.

other states, Minnesota firefighters are sent to help. And when we have a need that exceeds our capacity, we can call on experts from other states to help us, too.

### Prescribed Fire

Various divisions in the DNR burn some 40,000 to 60,000 acres of land each year to mimic the ecosystem-renewing benefits of natural fires. Prescribed fires also provide opportunities for wildland firefighters to gain experience under controlled conditions. DNR Forestry coordinates department activities to ensure these prescribed burns are carried out under appropriate weather conditions and with the necessary personnel and equipment. Prescribed fires on private lands are monitored and controlled through our burning permit system.

**Enforcing the Law.** Writing a ticket may be the last thing you expect to see a forester do, but it's part of the job for the 100-plus DNR Forestry staff who are certified to enforce fire-related laws. These individuals are authorized to issue citations related to burning permits and other restrictions on when, where, and what people can burn. They help recover firefighting expenses from responsible parties when fires have been caused by prohibited activity. They also enforce laws prohibiting certain activities in state forests, such as stealing trees or destroying property.

### Future

As the number of Minnesotans living in forested areas grows, so does the challenge of preventing damage due to wildfires. As a result, education and technical support to reduce risk of loss due to fire are an increasingly important part of our job. We are also placing more emphasis on preventing fires from starting in the first place through education and through seasonal restrictions on open burning.

