

Stewardship Notes

Indiana Division of Forestry



Protecting the Forest from Wildfire



When fire danger rating is "high," it means conditions are ripe for wild unplanned fires in your woods. Minimizing damage from, or preventing, wildfires is one more way you can protect your forest investment and guarantee that what is growing in your woods will meet your future ownership objectives. If the objective is quality timber, fire can be a most destructive agent.

Most hardwood species have thin bark covering the cambium, or growing tissue. If the cambium reaches 212 degrees Fahrenheit or higher for more than a few seconds, its cells will be "cooked," and the tissue will die. Bark covering the dead tissue will fall off, exposing the wood underneath to insects and disease. The result is a loss of wood quality due to staining, insect boring and decay. Wounds caused by fire normally form at ground level; most of a hardwood tree's value is located in the first 16' log (butt log).

A wildfire may remove most of the litter layer, and will kill understory shrubs and herbaceous plants. This results in degradation of water quality in nearby streams due to soil erosion or leaching of nutrients from the soil, depending on slope and time of year.

Habitat may be adversely affected for some species of deep woods birds and animals because fire may kill larger trees and allow openings to develop. These openings allow other kinds of wildlife to invade the site, and push out those critters that benefit from a closed, dense crown canopy. Finally, there is an abrupt change in the appearance of the burned forest with a loss of both spring and fall colors for the first few years after a wildfire.

WHAT TO DO

Step 1: Find out which fire department is responsible for protection and suppression where your property is located. Then contact them, let them know who you are, where your property is located, how it may be accessed in case of emergency, etc. If there is a locked gate, make arrangements for fire department access through that gate.

Stewardship Notes

Indiana Division of Forestry



Step 2: Contact all your neighbors and establish as cooperative a relationship as is possible for notifying the fire department, and working on the suppression of wildfires.

Step 3: Maintain a small cache of hand tools for small fires where suppression can be handled quickly and effectively by yourself or with the help of neighbors. These tools should consist of a shovel, rake, axe, fire flapper, and backpack sprayer with slide trombone handle applicator.

Step 4: Either by yourself or with the help of your neighbors maintain a vigilant watch for wildfires during periods of high fire danger. When the fire danger becomes extreme, keep people out of your woods.

Step 5: Don't burn when the fire danger is high or on days when the wind exceeds gusts of 15 miles per hour. Burn trash in a confined container away from natural fuels such as dry leaves or grass. Compost biodegradable materials instead of burning whenever and wherever possible.

In general, Indiana has two fire seasons a year: in the spring when the leaf litter on the ground dries out and before young herbaceous plants start to grow and cover the ground (green up); and in the fall after the leaves come down and before they are wetted down by the first heavy snow.