



New Jersey Pinelands Commission PRESS RELEASE

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New Jersey Pinelands Commission, New Jersey Forest Fire Service to launch new wildfire safety project in Barnegat and Stafford townships

NEW LISBON, N.J. – The New Jersey Pinelands Commission and New Jersey Forest Fire Service will join forces to undertake a new initiative aimed at identifying and implementing specific measures to mitigate wildfire hazards and risks in Barnegat and Stafford townships.

Officials from the two agencies announced the project during a press conference today at Brighton at Barnegat, one of the residential developments that were hardest hit during the May 2007 wildfire that burned 17,000 acres of forest in the Pinelands near the Warren Grove Gunnery Range.

“Last year’s wildfire had a significant impact on several Pinelands communities, and it reinforced the pressing need to address wildfire risks in areas of the Pinelands where forests and development meet,” Commission Chairperson Betty Wilson said. “Recognizing the need to address these risks, the Commission is working with the New Jersey Forest Fire Service to help Barnegat and Stafford townships take critical actions that will significantly reduce wildfire hazards and protect homes and businesses in these high-risk communities.

“We intend for this project to serve as a model for other Pinelands communities where there is a high risk for wildfires, with the ultimate goal of helping to protect life, property and the unique Pinelands environment we cherish,” Wilson added.

Barnegat and Stafford townships are located entirely within the Pinelands National Reserve, a 1.1 million-acre region that is home to fast-draining, sandy soil and expansive pine and oak forests, where more than 600 wildfires occur each year. The two Ocean County municipalities have an extensive history of wildfires, and have high-risk “wildland urban interfaces,” defined as areas or zones where structures and development meet with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels.

“For residents living in the fire-prone Pinelands, it is essential to take proactive steps to reduce their vulnerability and increase their chances of withstanding a wildfire’s threat,” said Lisa P. Jackson, Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, which oversees the state’s Forest Fire Service. “This project will help these towns identify specific strategies to create safer communities and to encourage residents to take responsibility for making their homes safe from wildfire.”

In the initial phase of the project, the Pinelands Commission and New Jersey Forest Fire Service

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will work with Barnegat and Stafford townships to identify wildfire hazards and risks within the two municipalities using aerial photography and Geographic Information Systems mapping data. Risk factors will include fire patterns and fire history, including where fires have occurred, where they are likely to occur again, the extent of the wildland urban interface, the number of units scattered within high-hazard areas, and the pattern and rate of development.

In addition, the two agencies will prepare mitigation measures that the communities could undertake to respond to identified hazards and risks, develop an action plan, identify available resources and help the municipalities implement those measures.

Examples of these mitigation measures include creating and/or maintaining existing fuel breaks (or areas that are free of vegetation that otherwise would enable fire to advance closer to structures); using fire-resistant roofing and siding when building or remodeling; cleaning gutters and roof surfaces of leaves and debris; spacing plants to minimize contact with structures and each other; pruning large shrubs and trees so there are at least 10 feet between their crowns or canopies; and planning alternate escape routes if an evacuation is necessary.

One of the most important steps property owners in wooded areas can take is to maintain a cleared and defensible buffer around their homes and other structures. In the Pinelands, the buffer should be at least 100 feet wide.

Officials from Barnegat and Stafford will appoint a project working committee that will help assess known community wildfire hazards and risks; help prepare the action plan; review local zoning and building standards that hinder fire safety response, and work with the Pinelands Commission and the New Jersey Forest Fire Service to revise regulations as needed; and promote wildfire safety strategies while encouraging community participation in the program.

Officials in both municipalities have expressed a strong interest in participating in the wildfire safety project.

“We’re very encouraged that the Pinelands Commission and New Jersey Forest Fire Service are coordinating the effort to establish this fire mitigation program,” Barnegat Mayor Jeff Melchiondo said. “There’s no doubt this program will be very instrumental in mitigating wildfire hazards in the western part of the county, and we look forward to working with the state.”

“In light of the events of last spring, we believe this is an excellent opportunity to identify and address issues and conditions in our community that pose wildfire risks for our residents,” Stafford Township Administrator Paul J. Shives said. “The memories of black smoke in the air over the western portion of our town are still fresh in everyone’s mind. This coordinated approach involving the Pinelands Commission, state Forest Fire Service and Barnegat and Stafford Townships will clearly benefit our residents and allow us to share information.”

The first meeting on the new wildfire safety project is scheduled for March 12 at 1 p.m. in the conference room in the Stafford Township Municipal Building on 260 Bay Avenue.

For more information on creating defensible space or making your home firewise, visit www.njwildfire.org or www.firewise.org

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