

# 2015 Spring Fire Season Summary

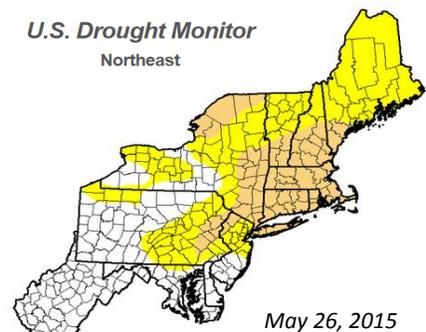
Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation



## Overview

The 2015 spring fire season has come to an end. Typically spring fire seasons begin shortly after snow melt when abundant dead fuels, grasses, leaves and twigs begin to dry out after being compacted by winter snow. The spring fire season ends with advanced green-up when live vegetation mixes with dead fuels and leaf out of the forest canopy shades the forest floor.

This year was different, however, due to a moderate drought in Rutland, Windsor, Bennington and Windham counties and abnormally dry conditions in the rest of the state through the month of May. Even with a full canopy of leaves, the forest ground fuels and leaf litter were drier than normal, and dry enough to sustain fire. Campfires, logging operations and lightning caused fires are common during late spring and summer during drought years. On May 22, 2015 a lightning fire on Eagle Mountain near Lake Champlain in Milton burned 6.5 acres.



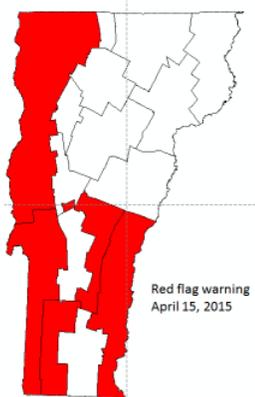
Source: U.S. Drought Monitor Index

## Fire Statistics

	2015 Fire Statistics		10-Year Average 2005-2014	
<i>Official reports – reports have been verified by warden or FPR</i>				
	#Fires	#Acres	#Fires	#Acres
<b>March</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>April</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>May</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>284</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Year to date</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>201</b>

## Spring Fire Season

---



The 2015 season got off to a slow start with a deep snowpack in place for much of state through the middle of April. The valleys dried out quickly, however and some early fire activity was reported. On April 15 the National Weather Service in Burlington, VT and Albany, NY issued a **red flag warning** for the Champlain and Connecticut River valleys: Grand Isle, Western Franklin, Western Chittenden, Western Addison, Western Rutland, Windsor, Bennington and Eastern Windham counties.

Two fires were reported on April 15, a 5-acre fire in Hartford and a 1-acre in Fairfax. Both of these fires were caused by debris burning. During the month of April, 38 fires that burned 50 acres were reported to FPR. An additional 9 fires have not yet been verified.

The end of April saw a period of light rain and snow showers that dampened fuels and kept fire danger low. A drying trend began in early May, and as fire danger climbed, the stage was set for a sharp increase in fire activity.

High fire danger on May 2-3 sparked multiple reports of wildfires. A statewide **red flag warning** was issued by the NWS offices in Burlington and Albany on May 4, 2015. Officially verified reports of 14 fires occurred that day burning over 200 acres. Another 6 unverified reports were recorded.

## Large Fire Activity May 4, 2015

---

- 137-acre forest fire in Norwich started by a downed power line. Firefighters from 12 departments from Vermont and New Hampshire responded. The forest around a cabin where the fire started was burned as well as a small shed, a pickup, and other small equipment. The cabin was not damaged. (see Valley News article: "[Brush Fires Across Vermont Hit Upper Valley Towns Hard](#)")  
Note: this is the largest forest fire reported in Vermont since the 1970's and the first that made the National Situation Report.
- 47-acre forest fire in Brattleboro started when a tree took down a power line. Firefighters from 15 departments from Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts battled this blaze in treacherous terrain with no access for ATV's. (see Brattleboro Reformer article: "[15 Departments from Tri-state Area Battle 50-acre Blaze on Melchen Road](#)")
- 26-acre forest fire in Andover started when brush piles that were burned 3 days earlier (permitted burn) rekindled from the strong winds. Firefighters from 5 departments responded. An airplane hangar and the plane inside were damaged. (see Brattleboro Reformer article: "[Chester Fire Chief Posts Update on Blaze that Scorched 25 Acres](#)")

## Burn Ban Implemented May 5, 2015

---

The Department of FPR implemented a no burn permit order to fire wardens on May 5, 2015 for the first time since 2005. The critically dry fuels, very high fire danger and red flag warning the previous day; an increase in fire activity including large fires and structures threatened, damaged or lost; and



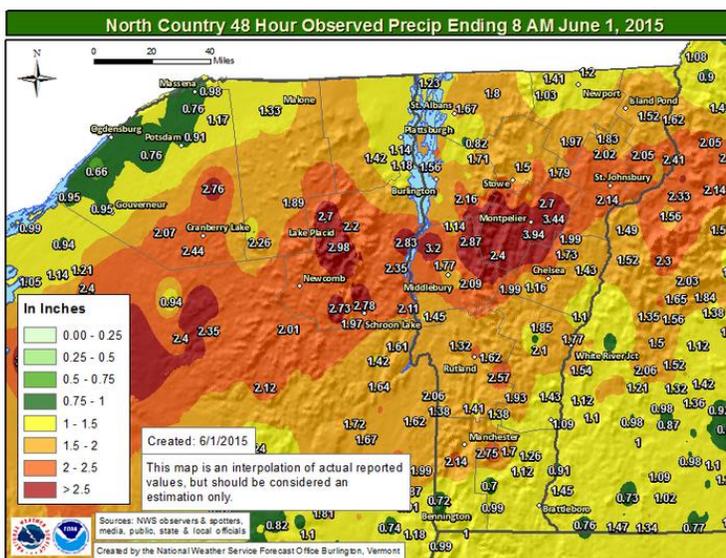
notifications from fire wardens that they had stopped issuing burning permits prompted this order.

A press release was approved by the Commissioner of FPR and released by the Governor effective at 3:00 pm through May 19, 2015 or sooner if significant rain occurred before that date. All fire wardens were notified by phone of this order. This ban was implemented in cooperation with the Green Mountain National Forest and with assistance from the Division of Emergency Management and Homeland Security. DEMHS arranged and managed a conference call with town emergency managers, fire chiefs and fire wardens.

Fire activity decreased significantly with the ban in place despite the fact that fire danger remained high to very high through the rest of the week. Fourteen fires burning 13 acres were reported from May 6 through May 10. Four of these fires were from downed power lines, one from a welder, one from railroad, one from lightning, and 7 in violation of the burn ban. Rain finally arrived in northern Vermont on Mother’s Day, May 10. Over the next couple of days, enough rain had fallen to dampen fuels and accelerate greening. The burn ban was lifted for all of Vermont except Bennington and Windham counties on May 12, 2015.

Another **red flag warning** was issued for Bennington and Windham counties only on May 13, 2015 with continuing high fire danger. Fire danger climbed back to high in northern Vermont on May 14 and 15 for mid and upper elevations where greening was not as advanced. The ban was allowed to expire for Bennington and Windham counties on May 19, 2015. Showers overnight on May 18 and the advancement of green-up justified the expiration.

A change in the weather pattern with more clouds and higher humidity moderated fire danger for much of the remainder of the month. Memorial Day weekend, May 23 and 24 saw an elevated fire danger due to existing dry conditions and warm temperatures, low Rh and very gusty winds. In fact, had it not been for advanced green-up, red flag conditions were marginally met. Another 6 fires burning 15 acres were reported during this time including the 6.5 acre lightning fire in Milton on May 22.



A much needed and long awaited extended rain event began early on May 31 and ended on June 2 with lingering showers. Rainfall amounts varied with 1+” in southern Vermont to nearly 4” in the central part of the state.

Rainfall amounts from Vermont’s fire weather stations received the following amounts from May 31 to June 2, 2015:

Nulhegan	1.76
Essex	1.88
Elmore	2.55
Danby	1.53
Woodford	1.71

All fuels were significantly saturated. KBDI (Keetch Byram Drought Index - the indicator of dry ground fuels) values plummeted but at the southern 2 weather stations, Danby and Woodford, KBDI's are still well above normal. A return to dry weather could elevate the potential for ground fires in southern VT in a short period of time.



## FPR Fire Response

**April 28, 2015:** Jim Esden, Resource Protection Forester, responded to a wildfire in Springfield. It was a wind-driven fire on very steep ground. Structure protection was needed as a home and large pile of tires were threatened. The primary tactic used in initial attack of this fire was “attack from the black”, which was the subject of our annual fire warden training just a couple of years ago.

On **Friday, May 1<sup>st</sup>**, Lars Lund, State Forest Fire Supervisor, was contacted by Craig O’Dell, Pownal Town Forest Fire Warden, about a large fire in the Clarksburg State Forest in the North Adams area of Massachusetts that began on Wednesday, April 29, 2015. Volunteer firefighters from Pownal and Stamford, Vermont plus many more from MA fire departments had worked the fire that day, and it was thought to be knocked down sufficiently by day’s end on Thursday. A National Guard helicopter had been working the fire and had made 30+ bucket drops. The fire was estimated to be 150-200 acres.

The fire became active on Thursday evening after everyone had come off the fireline. Craig and Lars were concerned about the possibility of the fire burning into Vermont. Lars contacted Kevin Boness, Fire Management Officer for the Green Mountain National Forest, to let him know about the fire and the possibility that if it got into Vermont it may burn onto Forest Service land. Kevin said he could get some USFS firefighters together for a 10-person crew. Lars picked up Craig at the Pownal Fire Station and traveled to the Incident Command Post (ICP) in North Adams, MA for an update. There were firefighters from Stamford, VT and Massachusetts towns already on the fireline after a 2-hour hike in.

Massachusetts Forest Fire Control (DCR) was also on scene and Dave Celino, MA Forest Fire Supervisor, did a recon flight in a MA State Police helicopter. MA DCR then came to the ICP to coordinate firefighting efforts. A MA DCR fire crew went to the fire and constructed fireline, and another MA DCR firefighter was also on the fireline as a Division Supervisor. The fire was not close to the MA/VT border and the National Guard helicopter was not available.

The ICP wanted more firefighters, so Craig coordinated a request for personnel and ATVs from the fire departments in the southwestern corner of Vermont. Craig and Lars left the ICP to return to the Pownal fire station to brief the incoming folks. Firefighters from Pownal, North Bennington and Arlington responded. They traveled back to North Adams to the staging area for assignment. Because of the time of day, it was decided not to send folks to the fireline that afternoon but instead to return at 7:00 Saturday morning. The fire was estimated to be about 275 acres, and the head and flanks of the fire had fireline in place.



On **May 4<sup>th</sup>**, Jim Esden was called in as a chainsaw expert for the Melchen Road Fire in Brattleboro that reached 47 acres. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, Jim responded with the full fire trailer and supplied pump, hose, mop-up kits and functioned as a chainsaw resource to the Tigertown Road Fire, a 137 acre fire in Norwich which threatened a home and destroyed a pickup truck. The fireline personnel were impressed at the pumping capacity of the Wick 250 pump used for mop-up at the Tigertown Road Fire. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, Lars attended an After Action Review for this fire.

On **May 6<sup>th</sup>**, Jim attended a meeting that included the Andover Fire Warden, Chester Fire Chief and the responsible party of a 26 acre fire on May 4<sup>th</sup> that damaged an airplane hangar and threatened a house. Lars had responded to this fire on May 5<sup>th</sup> as a chainsaw resource. There was also a fire in Brookline on May 4<sup>th</sup> that destroyed a storage building and threatened a house. During these incidents all equipment functioned properly and is now cleaned, stowed and ready for use again.

Eagle Mountain Fire in Milton: On Friday, **May 22<sup>nd</sup>**, a 6.5 acre forest fire was reported on Eagle Mountain in Milton. It is believed that the fire was caused by a lightning strike from thunderstorms on May 19th. Initially Milton FD responded. Georgia, Fairfax, Malletts Bay and St. Michaels Fire Departments responded to mutual aid calls for assistance. Milton Fire Department requested assistance from FPR. Strong winds off Lake Champlain continued to spread the fire throughout the morning. Initially Dan Dillner, Resource Protection Forester, responded with the FPR2 emergency response command truck. Mike Johnson, State Lands Forester, Bill Baron, Forestry District Manager, and Malcom Richardson, Seasonal Forestry Technician, responded with the District 3 Fire Trailer. Crews worked on the fire all day Friday. FPR supplied water to the fire with approximately 1 mile of fire hose and a high pressure pump. Local fire departments were impressed with the Department's ability to supply water to such a difficult fire. Kim Partlow, Administrative Assistant, assisted in the office by editing GIS data sent from the fire and creating maps that were sent back to the ground forces. Due to the steep and rocky terrain, all firefighters were off the line by 1900. Crews returned for a partial day on Saturday to mop up the fire, which was out by 12:00 noon. Crews worked a total of 21 hours on the fire. [Here is a link](#) to an article about the fire. Dan attended an After Action Review with Milton FD on June 1<sup>st</sup>, and Milton FD washed a mile of forestry hose.



## Prescribed Fire

---

**April 29:** Prescribed Burn at Dead Creek WMA, Warner Lot (44 acres). The goal of the burn was to kill woody vegetation to promote habitat for ground nesting birds that favor grassy open areas. This was a successful burn with representation from all 3 departments in ANR and the National Weather Service office in Burlington. The wind was brisk but was steady and forecasted from the North which allowed

the burn to be fired off without any problems. A pump and a progressive hose lay were set up around the southern edge of the unit as a contingency. It was not needed, but gave folks some experience in set-up and break-down of hoses, pump and appliances. The Weather Service provided weather updates every 30 minutes. Thanks to everyone who participated!

**April 30:** Prescribed Burn at Bird Mountain WMA, Big Field (30 acres). This was a successful burn with representation from the Forestry Division and DEC. The wind pushed the fire in varying directions and did not behave as was forecasted. Much of the unit burned in a very short time, and the end result was a mosaic with some unburned areas in the interior. There were some sections of the unit perimeter that had advancing fire burn to the edge, instead of having fire lit from the edge and burn back into the unit. The ATV trail and change in fuel types along the unit perimeter kept the fire in check with minimal slopover. Neil Monteith, State Lands Forester, provided weather updates. Thanks to everyone who participated!

**May 15:** Prescribed Burn at West Mountain WMA, Bull Throat Burn – South Unit (4+ acres). The goal for this burn was for wildlife habitat and to promote blueberries. This was a successful burn with representation from the Forestry Division, F&W, and Maidstone Forest Fire Warden. This small burn proved to be the most challenging. Near the completion of the burn, a wind gust and shift to the north caused the fire to escape and several tall fir trees were torched. This prompted several 911 calls in the area due to visible smoke. All calls for fire response by local fire departments were cancelled. As quickly as the wind



increased, it died down and changed back to the south. A portable pump and hoselay were set up, and the fire was extinguished. Mop up lasted several hours. This burn served as a good reminder to the firefighters that things can rapidly change in light fuels, and to always have contingency plans in place.

*This information is available online at:*  
<http://fpr.vermont.gov/forest/fires>

*Follow us on Twitter: @VTFireDanger*