



BUCKEYE FOREST COUNCIL

Protecting Ohio's native forests and their inhabitants

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Complete list of contacts below release. Supporting documents at <http://www.buckeyeforestcouncil.org>

Money to Burn: A prescription for destructive fire on public land? *Environmental coalition calls for investigation, files complaints*

In a telephone press conference Wednesday, a coalition of citizens and environmental groups called on the Strickland administration to “rein in Ohio Division of Forestry (ODOF) and conduct a full public investigation of its disastrous prescribed burn program, including April’s 2870-acre Shawnee Forest fire, and financial incentives for DOF to burn.” The group explained in the phone conference why such an investigation must examine:

- ODOF knowledge of and failure to heed extreme fire danger conditions that indicated a high probability of their prescribed burn escaping
- arson charges brought by ODOF during the fire, which the *prosecutor has recommended be dropped*
- site preparations for the burn (permitted for 250 acres) that eventually burned 2870 acres of Shawnee State Forest at great cost and danger to people and property
- the link between federal fire money and ODOF activity, and
- fire impacts on Ohio forests, local economies, and public health.

David Maywhoor, Director of the Buckeye Forest Council, a statewide forest protection nonprofit, said, “The Ohio Division of Forestry funds its budget in part with federal funds based on acres burned. Behind schedule and with an April 30 deadline looming, DOF set a fire in Shawnee State Forest on Friday, April 24—a day for which the National Weather Service had issued a warning of extreme fire danger ‘across much of southern Ohio.’” DOF’s permit was for 250 acres. 2870 acres burned over the next seven days.

Cheryl Carpenter, of Shawnee-based Voices for the Forest, described circumstances of the arson charge: “On Sunday, April 26, a 22-year old volunteer firefighter and Army veteran who had been assisting DOF on Friday called 911 from a home near where fire had flared. As he was running back toward the fire, he was arrested by DOF and charged with arson for fires that had started on Friday and for possession of criminal tools. According to legal documents, the criminal tool was a Bic lighter.”

Carpenter is one of at least four citizens and environmental groups filing Verified Complaints to Ohio EPA based on DOF violations of its open burning permit. Also filing are Matt Peters of Forest Watch, Barbara Lund of Adams County, and Buckeye Forest Council. Each filing requires that OEPA follow up with an investigation. Peters said, “The breadth and depth of the issues raised in these complaints show that this is not an isolated issue limited to one burn on one forest. Internal agency review has lost its legitimacy. Oversight is needed beyond the agency level.”

Carpenter’s OEPA complaint cites, among many issues, the Fire Chief’s Handbook and DOF’s lack of site preparation: “Many tall dead trees were left standing, even along the permit area perimeter. They act like chimneys and can project embers up to three miles.” The alleged arson fires were less than half a mile downwind of DOF’s fire. ODOF has acknowledged causing the spot fire that started between its permitted fire and the alleged arson fires. “DOF’s fire or spot fires could easily have started all the fires,” Carpenter stated. The Fire Marshall never ruled any of the fires arson. The prosecutor has recommended

that the case be dismissed: "They have a lot of work to do--both to show this is arson and to show that he is the one who did it. " (Mark Kuhn, Scioto County Prosecutor in Portsmouth Daily Times, 6-24-09)

J.B. Berry, Nile Township Volunteer Fire Department Assistant Chief, believes the accused "is innocent and that forestry officials have no physical evidence to prove otherwise," according to the Portsmouth Daily Times (6/6/09): "I don't even think there was an arsonist out there... You had winds that day gusting up to 40 miles an hour."

Brandi Whetstone, Sierra Club Ohio Chapter Conservation Program Coordinator, discussed political, health and environmental impacts of the burn program: "Prescribed fire in Ohio's public forests is inappropriate, given the lack of public hearings and the many public health and environmental impacts." She said, "Fire not only destroys valuable forest habitat but also releases air pollution that contributes to respiratory illness and climate change. Burning is of special concern in areas that fail to meet clean air standards for particulate matter. Ohio Department of Natural Resources should be preserving forests as carbon sinks instead of releasing greenhouse gases that contribute to global climate change."

Heather Cantino, of Buckeye Forest Council, stated, "DOF uses weak, frequently changing justifications to burn vast areas of public woodland in a part of the country where fire is not necessary but harmful. Unlike western forests, our forests are moist: wood rots and does not accumulate as fuel. The only way to protect homes is to protect the immediate area around them. Burning forests doesn't protect homes. Instead, DOF fires produce lots of dead wood that creates rather than eliminates wildfire risk."

Cantino continued, "Our forests are not adapted to fire; it harms our many forest species and encourages invasive plant species, a growing threat to our native forests. And fire's promotion of oaks is an unproven, controversial goal appropriate, at most, in well-constructed experiments. Where is DOF's monitoring of the effectiveness of any of its forest burn activities?" she asked.

"Unlike historic fires of earlier centuries, which would have been small and confined to ridgetops, DOF conducts high intensity burns from ridgetops to cove bottoms over many hundreds of acres at a time," Cantino said. "The studies DOF cites do not look at long term effects, late April burns, or effects on rare species. There is no support in the scientific literature for this kind or scale of burning," she concluded.

Barbara Lund added, "Most of Ohio has been appropriated for human use. Less than 1% is truly original. Even secondary native ecosystems are like tiny islands in an ocean of human development. Ohio's state forests contain biodiversity essential to human survival. But they are literally being managed to death."

David Maywhoor summed up with the group's call for action: "The Governor should appoint an independent investigative body to review this fire and all DOF fire and logging activities. Public scrutiny of DOF activities is essential to protect our citizens and our forests. We also look forward to prompt and complete investigation by OEPA of all violations cited in the recently submitted Verified Complaints."

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