

## **ALBANY PINE BUSH PRESERVE COMMISSION FIRE MANAGEMENT MEDIA RESPONSE PLAN**

### **This plan is to be utilized in the event of:**

- 1) escaped prescribed fires,
- 2) unplanned ignitions, or
- 3) other major incidents on prescribed fires or unplanned ignitions (i.e., serious medical/trauma injuries or fatality).

### **Goal of plan**

An informed (and ideally sympathetic) media can be your partner in educating the general population with regards to Pine Bush management issues. Ultimately, informed citizens, with input in an ongoing planning process, will usually be understanding and supportive citizens.

### **Summary of plan**

- Designate a “media savvy” spokesperson to work year-round with the media to help ensure accurate news reports on programs and incidents.
- In the event of an incident, the spokesperson runs a communication center from which information is provided to the media and the public, and from which news reports are monitored and corrected.
- In the event of an incident, be honest and concerned, talk in simple language, and adopt a sensitive, caring, apologetic tone. Stick to hard facts that are inherently educational with regards to why prescribed fire is used as a management tool. Avoid a defensive tone and assume something went wrong.

### **Preparatory work with media**

- Develop and maintain (print, television & radio) media contacts on a year-round basis.
- Take the initiative to provide important media contacts with personal tours of the Preserve and/or fire management events (site preparation, burn training, and controlled burns).
- Designate a primary media contact person (year-round) for all Preserve issues. This person should cultivate personal relationships with media contacts, and become an “expert” source for the media.
- Additional staff and partners should also be exposed to and given the opportunity to work with the media, for recognition and for practice for the time they might be the primary spokesperson in a crisis.
- Supply up to date Pine Bush information, maps and phone numbers, in a format that is useful to different forms of media (newspapers, TV, and radio). Phone numbers should include primary, backup and home/emergency numbers for the designated primary media contact.
- Prior to each prescribed fire season, update media contact list, being sure to touch base with all contacts. Include phone/cell/pager and fax numbers for each individual.

### **Designated primary media contact person**

- Designee(s) should have basic prescribed or wildland fire training and have participated on, or observed one or more burns. Experience with media relations and familiarity with the “Incident Command System” is helpful. Designees must be “media savvy.”
- Possible courses to assist with this include: S-130, Basic Wildland Firefighter; S-190, Introduction to Fire Behavior; ICS-100 Introduction to the Incident Command System (ICS); ICS-200 ICS for Single Resource & Initial Action Incidents; and IS-700 National Incident Management System (NIMS), An Introduction.
- Media contact personnel must be familiar with burns scheduled for any given day and should have a copy of the prescription, and access to the fire management and contingency plans.

## PROCEDURES FOR AN ESCAPED PRESCRIBED BURN, UNPLANNED IGNITION, OR OTHER MAJOR INCIDENTS ON PRESCRIBED FIRES OR UNPLANNED IGNITIONS

In the event of an incident, be honest and concerned, speak in simple language (avoid jargon), and adopt a sensitive, caring, apologetic tone. Stick to hard facts that are inherently educational with regards to why prescribed fire is used as a management tool. Avoid a defensive tone and assume something went wrong.

1. Pre-determined contingencies. First and foremost, the crew on site of an escape must follow pre-established emergency protocol (i.e., calling for back-up suppression forces, falling back to contingency lines, etc.).
2. Make contact with ALL of the following persons.

Christopher Hawver	Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission, Executive Director (or designated backup)
Paula Seamon	The Nature Conservancy, National Fire Management Coordinator
Loretta Simon	State of New York, Attorney Generals Office
Jonathan Kaledin	The Nature Conservancy, New York State Office, Senior Attorney
Shauna DeSantis	The Nature Conservancy, New York State Office, State Attorney
Kathy Moser	The Nature Conservancy, New York State Office, Deputy Dir. of Conservation Programs

3. Activate a communications center. The primary media contact needs this “war room” and should be equipped with multiple phone lines, a scanner, a fax, plus access to and/or an ability to monitor media reports (Radio and TV). A map of the Preserve must be available for reference and a “faxable” map to send to the media showing the location of the burn and direction of the escape; **prescribed burn plans should not be released to the media.** The Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission’s administrative office can serve as this center. This has the benefit of removing the media from the site of the incident for the purpose of interviews with the spokesperson. At other times it may be appropriate to have the communication center at the site.
4. Establish contact with personnel at the incident. The spokesperson must receive facts from the field. This information must also be communicated immediately with lead DEC personnel. In coordination with DEC, establish communication (cell phone) with personnel on site or at the incident command post. While the primary responsibilities for field personnel are related to control and safety efforts, the spokesperson needs facts regarding the size of the fire, what may have caused the escape, and what is being done for control. A designated field person should be in contact with the media spokesperson as often as possible.
5. Reach out to the media. Be proactive. Recognize reporter deadlines and return all calls as soon as possible (within 15 to 20 minutes). Call back even if you have nothing new to report. Prioritize TV and radio ahead of daily papers, and daily papers ahead of weekly papers. Agree to any and all interviews. Avoid the statement “the Commission wasn’t available for comment,” or worse.
6. If no facts are available - Assume that something went wrong. A suggested statement with regards to a confirmed escape might incorporate some of the following:
  - *Clearly something went wrong with a prescribed fire in the Pine Bush.*
  - *The focus now is on safety and controlling and extinguishing the fire to minimize damage or inconvenience to people and property in the area.*
  - *Fire is dangerous and can be very destructive. In the past, large 500-acre plus wildfires used to burn every ten or fifteen years as a natural part of the Pine Bush. While this was good for the rare Pine Bush ecosystem, such fires today would threaten people and property, and can no longer occur.*
  - *Prescribed fire is critical in reducing fuel accumulations that pose wildfire threats to neighboring landowners. Prescribed fire is also a critical management tool used to restore and maintain the rare Pine Bush ecosystem.*
  - *Smaller prescribed fires simulate the effects of larger wildfires. These fires are initiated only when weather conditions and forecasts are conducive to effective burning while also minimizing the risk of possible escape. Periodic prescribed fires decrease the build-up of organic materials and thus reduce the potential for wildfires.*
  - *Consistent with pre-established emergency contingency plans, trained Pine Bush firefighting personnel are on site applying contingency actions and other suppression agencies are responding to assist with the containment and extinguishment of the fire.*
  - *The Pine Bush fire management program has been active since 1991. Since then over 1,000 acres have been safely and effectively burned.*

- *The Pine Bush fire management program will be immediately suspended. There will be a review of the incident to determine what may have gone wrong and what changes could be made to decrease the potential for an escape or a wildfire.*

6. Questions which may be posed by the media and suggested answers.

*Why did you do this burn?*

The Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission manages land for wildlife habitat and rare plants and animals. Prescribed fire can improve wildlife habitat, reduce hazardous fuel loads, reduce abundance of non-native species, and improve habitat for rare animals and plants, such as the Karner blue butterfly.

*How do you control the burn?*

The prescribed burn crew is highly trained and experienced in using fire. Fire suppression engines and ATV's support the crew. Firelines are installed around the burn unit by removing fuel from the burn unit and adjacent areas. For a particular burn, the crew typically starts at the downwind side and ignites the burn unit side of the fireline. The fire will burn slowly into the wind with low flame lengths. Once the fire has burned in and created a blackline, the crew will light flanking and head fires.

*How do you notify neighbors and officials?*

Prior to the burn, Commission staff share burn plans with NYS DEC Division of Lands and Forests and Division of Forest Protection and Fire Management. Neighbors are mailed a flyer notifying them where and when a prescribed burn may take place in the future and information is posted on our web site. The morning of the burn, Commission staff make phone calls to notify officials and agencies, local businesses, and residents of the burn.

*How long has the Albany Pine Bush Preserve been conducting burns?*

The Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission has been conducting prescribed fires since 1991. The Pine Bush has only had one other incident in fifteen years. In April 1999, a prescribed fire escaped our control for a short period of time burning 65 acres of Preserve land. There was no significant private property damage and thankfully, no injuries to personnel in that incident.

*What are pre-established emergency contingency plans?*

In the event of an escape or unplanned ignition, the crew will respond first by calling for back-up suppression forces. This generally includes Region 4 DEC Forest Rangers and local fire departments. They will then assess and address all potential threats to life and property from the escape. Given that all threats to life and property have been abated, the crew will focus on falling back to secondary contingency firelines, which include surrounding trails, roads and streams or newly cut lines, to "starve" the fire of fuel.

7. Monitor media reports. Disperse information and simultaneously correct mis-information. Do not allow false statements to go uncorrected or they will be repeated and "become fact." First impressions are powerful. While correcting facts to help the media reflect reality, be proactive and provide statements (sound bites) that accurately reflect the program. Try to speak in short sound bites and do not try to provide long detailed explanations, especially if a camera/recorder is running.
8. Provide for positive external statements. This can be one of the most powerful ways of gaining balanced coverage in the media. No matter what you say, you are still representing the Pine Bush Preserve Commission. A positive statement from an external party such as a fire department chief or suppression official will have significant impact.
9. Identify the Commission. With the media, identify and put the focus on the Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission, not our partners/members such as the State, municipalities, the County, or The Nature Conservancy. Remember a simple rule - partners/donors get all the credit when something goes right. The Commission gets the blame if something goes wrong.

10. Communication with partners (See DEC Media Contacts above). Key individuals within associate or partner agencies/organizations should be informed directly and as soon as reasonably possible. Ideally this communication is in advance of their hearing news reports. Initiate contact after confirmation of an incident or when there is otherwise incomplete information. Suggest there be coordination with the Commission prior to their issuing comments to the media. Suggest that any media contact be forwarded to the established communication center.

11. Follow-up

- Arrange for an outside authority to critique the incident (See DEC Media Contacts above), interview involved individuals, and issue a report. The Commission and/or Pine Bush Preserve Commission staff should not lead such an investigation. No attempt should be made to keep anything from the public. Everything should be made available, good and bad. Honesty and credibility is critical. All planning documents should be reviewed.
- Write an editorial or “letters to the editor” to express gratitude for support from suppression forces/agencies/volunteers.
- Issue a press release to correct any incorrect facts if necessary.
- Invite the media to the next burn (or to escape site several weeks later to see re-growth) and provide news releases and information packets.
- Learn from the experience.
- Follow burns with field trip to show benefits of prescribed fire(s). Possibly visit multiple sites as a progression (an area burned this season, last season, two years ago, five years ago, etc.).

**CONTACTS:**

**Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission - designated media contact(s)**

Primary:

Christopher Hawver, Executive Director (also New York State Fire Manager, The Nature Conservancy)

office phone            518-456-0655 x1218  
office fax                518-456-8198  
cell  
home

Backup #1:

Neil Gifford, Conservation Director

office phone            518-456-0655 x1214  
office fax                518-456-8198  
cell  
home

Backup #2:

Wendy Borden, Communications & Outreach Director

office phone            518-456-0655 x1211  
office fax                518-456-8198  
cell  
home

**The Nature Conservancy**

National Fire Management

Paula Seamon, Director of Fire Management and Training

office phone            850-668-0926  
office fax                850-668-7781  
cell  
home

New York State Office

Jonathan Kaledin, Senior Attorney

office phone            518-690-7861  
office fax                518-869-2248  
cell  
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Shauna DeSantis, State Attorney  
office phone 518-690-7860  
office fax 518-869-2248  
cell  
home

Kathy Moser, Deputy State Director of Conservation Programs  
office phone 518-690-7868  
office fax 518-869-2332  
cell  
home

**State of New York, Attorney's General Office**

Loretta Simon  
office phone 518-402-2724  
(M-F, leave message after hours and on weekends)

**SUPPLEMENTAL CONTACTS:**

**The Nature Conservancy**

Eastern New York Chapter Office

Tony Wilkinson, Deputy Director  
office phone 518-690-7845  
office fax 518-869-2443  
cell

**New York State Department of Environmental Conservation**

Central Office, Albany

Maureen Wren, Assistant Commissioner of Media Relations  
Kimberly Chupa, Public Information Officer  
Lori O'Connell, Public Information Officer  
office phone 518-402-8000  
office fax 518-402-2209

Region 4 Office, Schenectady

Vacant, Regional Director  
office phone 518-357-2068  
office fax 518-357-2087  
cell

Rick Georgeson, Regional Public Affairs Officer  
office phone 518-357-2075  
office fax 518-357-2438

## CAPITAL DISTRICT AREA LOCAL MEDIA SOURCES & CONTACTS

### Newspaper

- **Albany Times Union**  
Brian Nearing (454-5094) tucitydesk@timesunion.com (Fax 454-5628)
- **Altamont Enterprise**  
Melissa Hale-Spencer, Saranac Hale-Spencer (861-5008) altamontenterprise@csdsl.net (Fax 861-5105)
- **Colonie Spotlight**  
General (439-4949) spotnews@nycap.rr.com (Fax 439-0609)
- **Metroland**  
General (463-2500) mertoland@metroland.net (Fax 463-3712)
- **Business Review**  
General (640-6800) albany@bizjournals.com (Fax: 438-9212)  
Neil Springer, Managing Editor (640-6817)
- **Saratogian**  
General (584-4242) news@saratogian.com (Fax 587-7750)  
Barbara Lombardi, Managing Editor (583-8711)
- **Schenectady Gazette**  
Jill Bryce (432-4391) (Fax: 458-7362) gazette@dailygazette.net (Fax 432-6388)  
Eli Fanning (432-4391)
- **Associated Press, Albany Bureau** (Fax 438-5891)  
General (458-7821)

### Radio

- WRVE 99.5 (Fax 452-4855)
- WGY 810 (Fax 452-4859)
- WFLY 92.3 (Fax 786-6692)
- WGNA 107.7 (Fax 782-1486)
- WAMC 90.3 (432-0991)

### Television

- **FOX23** (Fax 862-0930)
  - General (862-2323)
  - Jeb Rowledge/Assignment Desk (862-0995)
- **WRGB Ch 6 (CBS)** (Fax 346-6249)
  - Tips line (346-8477)
  - General; ask for assignment desk (346-6666)
- **WTEN Ch 10 (ABC) and 19** (Fax 426-4792)
  - Terry Cavanaugh (436-0771)
- **WNYT Ch 13 (NBC)** (Fax 434-0659)
  - Assignment Desk (436-4791)

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Craig Kostrzewski & Wendy Borden, Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission. January 2007.