State of the Forest Fire Warden Organization

It is no secret that the number of volunteer firefighters in Pennsylvania is significantly lower than it has been in the past. A recent report commissioned by the Pennsylvania Senate found that the number of volunteer firefighters in Pennsylvania has decreased from about 300,000 in the 1970’s to approximately 38,000 today. Given this reality, I thought it would be beneficial to look at the current state of the Forest Fire Warden organization and share some information with you:

- There are currently about 1,400 active Forest Fire Wardens in Pennsylvania. Of those wardens, approximately 1,100 are volunteers and the rest are DCNR employees.

- There are wardens in 66 of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania. Delaware County is the only county without at least one Forest Fire Warden.

- The top three counties for number of Forest Fire Wardens are Centre, 70; Clearfield, 63; and Schuylkill, 56.

- Philadelphia and Washington Counties have exactly 1 warden in each county.

While the numbers of Forest Fire Wardens may be diminished from the levels of years passed, our volunteers remain an active part of our organization. Along with our cooperating volunteer fire departments, wardens are often the first responders to new and emerging wildfires. In this role, wardens can gather information that is essential for the local DCNR staff to provide situational awareness, guide the initial response to wildfires, and determine any additional resource needs.

As we sit on the cusp of another spring wildfire season it is important for us all to recognize that volunteer Forest Fire Wardens remain a vital part of the wildland fire program within DCNR. I am grateful that we still have a viable organization and would like to offer my sincere thank you for your past efforts and dedication. Please have a safe fire season this spring.

Michael D. Kern, Chief Forest Fire Warden
A Milestone That No One Wanted to See

I read an article where the FDNY lost their 200th firefighter to 9/11 related illness. That is a milestone no one wanted to see. As of today, that means they lost 543 firefighters due to 9/11. How many more will we lose? I can’t even begin to imagine how many lives have been affected by this horrible event.

We continue to lose firefighters across the nation due to a reason other than 9/11 and that is exposures we face every day that cause cancer.

I know that a fair amount of forest fire wardens are also volunteer firefighters including myself. I thought this may be worthwhile talking about.

I have been reading a lot of articles and information regarding cancer in the fire service. It is a well-known fact that firefighters have a much greater chance of developing cancer over non-firefighters. According to IAFF (International Association of Fire Fighters), firefighters have a 60% chance of dying from cancer. Nearly three times the national average. Based on the information I have been reading we may be able to limit some risks. Some things that have been recommended are wearing SCBA (self-contained breathing apparatus) during mop-up and overhaul, cleaning our gear including wildland gear, wearing gloves while cleaning hose and equipment. Some of the information suggests we are absorbing carcinogens through our skin. Think about what our gear, our hose and other tools are exposed to or what we drag it through. I remember an instructor I had years ago in the volunteer fire service that would chew you a new one if he saw you handling hose or tools without wearing gloves. The Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine finds firefighters are developing testicular, bone marrow, skin, brain, prostate, colon cancer, and lymphoma at a higher rate than the general population.

I am a cancer survivor of twelve years now. I was one those guys like many of you, who didn’t mind dirty turnout gear and did not wash it as often as I should have. I didn’t wear SCBA during mop up. I didn’t mind wearing wildland gear for more than one shift. After receiving my cancer diagnosis, I started to rethink some things. Did my desire to fight fires have anything to do with me getting cancer? What really caused my cancer? It’s likely that we will never know. What I thought was the worst day of my life, having my doctor tell me that I had cancer was topped only when my oldest daughter told me that she was diagnosed with cancer. Yes, my daughter too was a volunteer firefighter for several years and had a fair amount of interior (structure) firefighting experience along with wildland firefighting. At the age of 32, on her wedding anniversary in 2016, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. After a year of chemo and a double mastectomy all seemed well until January 9th 2019. This truly was the worst day of my life, she told me that her cancer was back. After nearly a year of treatments of radiation and chemo all seems well. Statistics show that breast cancer in female firefighters is higher than that of the national average. She too did not mind wearing gear that had some black on it from previous calls. Did her years of firefighting contribute to her cancer? It is likely we will never know the answer to that question either.

I have talked to several firefighters that say they don’t worry about dirty gear. Well you should. It could not only affect your life but the lives of your loved ones. Don’t carry your gear in the passenger compartment of your vehicle. Do you really know what all was in the smoke that your gear was exposed to? How many of us have been to fires where we have no idea what all was burning such as old strip mine pits or sinkholes?

My boss purchased us some wipes made especially for firefighters to carry in our trucks, so we can wipe off our face and hands. How many times have we just taken our gloves off on the line or at a structure fire and ate a sandwich? I’m guilty but I have changed my habits. You too should have the wipes in your truck, engine, tender or tanker, as many in the structural fire service call them. Wash your gear often. Both structural and wildland. Wear gloves when handling tools and hose. If you can smell smoke inside your truck or engine from the last call you were on, it probably should be cleaned. If you can’t make the change for yourself, then think of all those who depend on you. We are all firefighters to help others, so let’s start by helping keep ourselves healthy and remain here to help for the long haul.

My daughter didn’t mind me sharing her story and we both agree that you should take our advice. We can tell you from experience that you and your family do not want to go through what we went through.

Terry Smith, Special Investigator, DFFP
27 Questions for Wildland Fire Fighters

It seems that another year has come and once again, has passed us rather quickly. Last year, I found an article in Firehouse Magazine, that I thought was an excellent way of putting the past year in perspective in order to help us prepare for the new year. David Griffin wrote the original article, and I want to share some of his message. David Griffin’s article entitled “99 Questions for Reflection” is directed toward structural fire fighters. However, I’m going to craft it to fit wildland fire so that we may better relate and benefit from these questions.

The goal of these questions was to spark thought on aspects of both work and personal life. The idea was that in asking questions, each firefighter would notice things that may not be inherently obvious in their day to day routine. Consider this an after-action review for yourself while preparing for the upcoming fire season. As we all know, the weather is ever changing and for the past few years it has been reliable at keeping wildland fires to a minimum. The Volunteer Fire Departments in my coverage area have been doing a fine job keeping wildfires small. Before I digress, here are the questions to consider:

1. What went well this past year and why?
2. What didn’t go well and why?
3. Did you solve the things that didn’t go well and was a solution found for the future?
4. Was the solution shared among your coworkers?
5. Do you enjoy the work you do? *
6. Are you physically fit to perform your job?
7. Could you possibly cause an incident within an incident because of your fitness level?
8. Do you have all the PPE needed to perform your job safely?
9. Are you honest with people or do you tell them what you think they want to hear?
10. Are you open to learning new concepts besides the way you’ve always done it? *
11. Have you trained with a fire shelter and are you mentally prepared to handle a potential fire shelter deployment?
12. What keeps wildland fire fighters from deploying their shelters?
13. Do you know your limitations and accept them?
14. Did you seek improvement on your limitations whether professional or personal?
15. Are you an innovator in your chosen field? *
16. What have you learned this past year?
17. Are wildland fire related policies clear in your district?
18. Do you know these policies and are they understood by all involved?
19. What aspect of your fire forester/ forest fire specialist supervisor / fire warden duties do you enjoy most and why?
20. In what part of your profession do you excel and are you passing this knowledge on?
21. Why do you come to work every day? *
22. Are you spending enough time with your family? *
23. Do you take ownership of your organization to help make improvements? *
24. In what ways? *
25. While on a wildfire have you considered risk versus reward? Page 1 IRPG
26. Have you spoken up when a tactical pause was needed on a wildfire/prescribed fire operation?
27. When is the right time to take a tactical pause?

Consider these questions and use them to help yourself be the best that you can be. The questions with an asterisk (*) are questions that David Griffin asked in the article that seemed pertinent to everyone, so I left them as he asked them. I will leave you with this quote from David Griffin; “It is important to remember no matter what position we are in or our rank, we are constantly evolving or, unfortunately, remaining stagnant.” Which are you? Evolving or stagnate; and why?

Mandy Burgoon, Fire Forester, Gallitzin Forest District
Logistic & Finance Section Update

I just wanted to provide a brief update on what’s been happening in the Logistics and Finance Section.

Volunteer Fire Assistance – We continue to receive a relatively respectable amount of funding from the U.S. Forest Service to offer Volunteer Fire Assistance grants to VFDs and Support Crews. We recently started issuing a percentage of this funding to each Forest District to purchase wildland fire suppression equipment and PPE for volunteers. If you need something, I urge you to contact the Forest Fire Supervisor Specialist or Fire Forester at your local Forest District to see if they can assist. A new requirement for 2020 grant recipients will be implemented to encourage VFDs to report wildfires to the Bureau. This will help us more accurately track wildfire occurrences, which is a primary factor in determining funding for this program.

Equipment – The Division of Forest Fire Protection has benefited from State Fire Assistance (SFA) grants as well as available Oil & Gas funding the last few years. This funding has allowed us to replace much of our older outdated equipment. The Wildland Fire Equipment Task Force we formed worked diligently to standardize this equipment and did a great job! Since 2014 we’ve obtained 38 Type 6/7 Skid-Units, 11 Type 5 Flatbed Units (400-500 gallon), numerous UTV Skid-Units, and 4 Type 6 Engines. We do continue to receive some equipment through these programs, but equipment is primarily limited to heavy duty (2 ½ & 5 Ton) vehicles, as these are what are primarily available.

Prevention – Unlike VFA and SFA funding, which has remained relatively steady, prevention funding has decreased. Wildfire prevention and mitigation funds have been cut in half in recent years and Oil & Gas funding has not been able to fill the void. We appreciate all the assistance you provide with wildfire prevention efforts and wish we could provide more materials to distribute at prevention programs.

RAWS – We’ve added several RAWS across the state within the past two years. See the map and associated QR Codes at the end of the newsletter.

Training – We are in the early stages of planning a May or June 2021 Forest Fire Wardens Weekend; more information will follow. This will be a separate event from the Wildland Fire Training Academy, as we feel what we attempted in 2019 did not allow ample time for BOF fire staff to interact enough with our Wardens.

Thanks for all you do, keep up the good work, and have a safe fire season.

Charlie Choplick, Logistics and Finance Section Chief, DFFP

The Benefits of Wildfire Reporting

One of the things that the warden organization has struggled with for decades has been wildfire reporting. It is no secret that people do not usually enjoy doing paperwork, especially paperwork that is viewed as being unnecessary. Having said that, it is important that all wardens realize not only the necessity of reporting wildfires, but also the benefits to our organization.

1. Accurate wildfire reporting leads to a more complete picture of when and where wildfires occur. This allows us to make good decisions about when and where to do things like positioning aircraft, conducting training, or buying new equipment.

2. Accurate wildfire reporting leads to a more complete picture of wildfire causes. It is difficult to plan or conduct targeted wildfire prevention if we have an incomplete picture of what is actually causing wildfires to occur.

3. Accurate wildfire reporting provides us with better opportunities to sustain and even increase funding. All states are given a certain amount of federal funding for their wildland fire programs that is partially allocated based on the number of wildfires that occur. This directly translates into the amount of equipment, supplies, and training opportunities that we can provide to our volunteers.

4. Finally, reporting wildfires is a legal mandate of all Forest Fire Wardens. You took an oath to perform the duties of a Forest Fire Warden which includes the requirement to report all wildfires which come to your knowledge. It doesn’t matter how small or insignificant the fire may seem, if it is a wildfire, it needs to be reported. Are you doing your duty to fulfill this requirement?

We are not looking to increase wildfire reporting to bill or penalize people who accidentally
start fires, but we are looking to try and obtain a more complete picture of the wildfires that do occur in the Commonwealth. Forest Fire Wardens are urged to contact their local Forest District for more details on the best way to report wildfires.

**Michael D. Kern, Chief Forest Fire Warden**

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**Wildland Fire Academy 2020**

The Division of Forest Fire Protection is happy to announce that registration for the 2020 Wildland Fire Academy is now open! The academy will be conveniently located in central PA at the Lock Haven University, May 26-31. Initial registration ends April 15, 2020.

This year’s academy will focus heavily on wildland engine activities; entry level through advanced level courses are offered.

- **L-280, Followership to Leadership**
- **PMS-419, Engine Operator (ENOP)**
- **S-130, Firefighter Training (Blended) - Field Day ONLY**
- **S-131, Firefighter Type 1**
- **S-211, Portable Pumps and Water Use**
- **S-212, Wildland Fire Chain Saws**
- **S-215, Fire Operations in the Wildland Urban Interface**
- **S-230, Crew Boss (Single Resource)**
- **S-231, Engine Boss (Single Resource, Blended)**
- **S-270, Basic Air Operations**
- **S-355, Ground Support Unit Leader - Tentative**
- **Advanced Investigation Techniques, Target Group: Wildland Fire Investigators**
- **Basic Wildland Fire Crew - PA WFC candidates only**
- **FFT1/CRWB OJT - PA WFC members only**

For more information and to register, go to [https://dffp.ticketleap.com/2020-wildland-academy/details](https://dffp.ticketleap.com/2020-wildland-academy/details)

There is no tuition for classes and on-campus meals and lodging will be covered by the Division of Forest Fire Protection. Please make every effort to travel with a Bureau of Forestry employee, because we cannot reimburse mileage for this event. Likewise, students and staff choosing off-campus meals and/or lodging will not be reimbursed by the DFFP. Courses are scheduled to provide maximum opportunities for students. Register for as many classes as you'd like, but if any overlap, please indicate your preference in the registration remarks.

**Registering for a class does not guarantee placement.** Students will be notified of acceptance after April 15, 2020.

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**New Employee**

My name is Mike Becker and I recently accepted the Qualifications and Training Specialist position within the Division of Forest Fire Protection. I am stationed at the Hazleton Airtanker Base where, during fire season, I am tasked with managing the base as well as a helicopter stationed at Penn Forest. I began my career with the Bureau of Forestry in March 1997 when I was hired as a timber management forester assigned to the Bald Eagle State Forest. I was fortunate to have worked with many outstanding people and be exposed to a variety of program areas including wildland and prescribed fire during my time on the Bald Eagle. I owe many district folks, some currently assigned and some that have moved on, a heartfelt thank you. Prior to my time with the Bureau of Forestry I worked for Bartlett Tree Experts in York County, PA and Tuscarora Hardwoods, Inc. in Perry County, PA. Like many foresters working for the bureau I attended school at Penn State. I graduated from Penn State Mont Alto with an Associate in Science Degree in Forest Technology and then from University Park with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Forest Science.

I became involved with the volunteer fire service in 1992 and have been able to serve several communities as well as two support crews. I was lucky enough to have had the opportunity to serve as Lieutenant and Captain for a few years and was able to learn a little about fire and the internal workings of a volunteer fire department. Firefighters, especially volunteers, are a special character of people and we all owe them our respect and gratitude. I live in Mifflinburg, Union County with my wife Gretchen and our dog Callie. We are blessed to have been able to raise two kids. Our daughter, Cassie, is married and works as a
Radiologic Technologist at a trauma center in southcentral Pennsylvania. Our son, Garrett, attends Lebanon Valley College. Garrett is majoring in Exercise Science/Athletic Training with the goal of working as a strength and conditioning coach for a major university or professional sports team. Garrett is a defensive tackle on the Lebanon Valley football team – Go Dutchmen!

I appreciate the opportunity placed in front of me to assist in the training and development of today’s firefighters as well as the firefighters of the future. As I said earlier, firefighters are a special family and I am privileged to work with all of you.

Mike Becker, Wildland Fire Qualifications and Training, DFFP

**Years of Service**

Please congratulate the following Wardens, who are receiving their 50+ years of service awards.

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Year Appointed</th>
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