

MDC and rural fire departments are partners in fighting wildfires

One of the Missouri Department of Conservation's (MDC) partners in fighting or preventing wildfires turns 75 this year, while the others are of greatly varying ages. All are valuable, as is MDC's role in protecting private property and wildlife habitat from accidental or arson fires in rural areas.

One partner almost everybody knows – Smokey Bear. The affable bear was created in 1944 amidst World War II concerns that America's valuable forests could be harmed by accident or arson. Smokey turns 75 this year. Many generations can remember Smokey appearing at public events, schools, or in ads. Many a baby boomer sent a card or letter by U.S. Mail to receive a return letter, badge and song lyrics confirming them as an official Smokey ranger. They pledged to spread the word, "Remember, Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires."

Today, Smokey has a website, a Twitter account, and a new slogan: "Only You Can Prevent Wildfires." The change recognizes fire dangers in grasslands, woodlands, and farming country as well as forests. Smokey points out the value of natural resources to people, value harmed by wildfire. The bear with blue jeans and a ranger hat is provided by the U.S. Forest Service, the National Association of Foresters, and the Ad Council.

Smokey has plenty of help in rural Missouri from MDC and volunteer fire departments. MDC provides grants and surplus federal equipment to volunteer fire departments in rural areas that are not supported by a local tax. In the current fiscal year, MDC awarded grants to 184 rural fire departments totaling \$420,198 for safety and firefighting gear. Funds for the grants are provided by MDC and the U.S. Forest Service. Also, MDC will send personnel and equipment to help fight wildfire as a mutual aid response if volunteer departments need help battling a major fire.

"For some of these rural fire departments, equipment from these programs may be all they have," said Mark Nelson, a MDC regional forestry supervisor based in the Kansas City area. "We also provide training in wildland fire suppression."

Missouri typically does not have vast wildfires like those afflicting the forests of the West. However, the state does have weather affected fire seasons and threats. Dry conditions during late winter and early spring can pose fire dangers with dead grasses and leaves adding to potential fuel. That danger typically passes with green up of grasses, shrubs and trees. Late fall and early winter can also provide wildfire threats if dry conditions occur.

MDC staff and volunteer firefighters have often worked together to snuff out wildfires that threatened forests, woodlands, pastures, and nearby homes, barns, and sheds.

"Our work with the volunteer fire departments is important to public safety and protecting precious natural resources," Nelson said.

The largest and most dangerous fires in the Kansas City region are found where timber stands are largest, he said. The extensive wildlands near Truman Lake and Lake of the Ozarks have suffered from past fires.

Fire can play a positive role in wildlands and vegetation management on farms. The messages have changed a bit since Smokey issued his first warnings. Conservationists and

farm managers now use prescribed burns to encourage wildlife habitat or to improve cattle forage. But those fires involve planning and monitoring with a safe mix of fuel low, humidity, and wind conditions.

Wildfires, however, burn hotter and can destroy trees and vegetation that supports wildlife. Scorching fire can damage soil by burning organic matter. Many wildfires are started by accidents. Sparks or flames from careless debris burning is the number one cause in Missouri, Nelson said. But arson is also a threat to the state's forests and grasslands.

Operation Forest Arson provides rewards from \$100 to \$1,000 for information leading to the arrest or conviction of a wildfire arsonist. Anyone spotting suspicious activity can call their local conservation agent or 1-800-392-1111. The program is a cooperative effort by MDC, the Conservation Federation of Missouri, and the U.S. Forest Service. Information is available at <https://short.mdc.mo.gov/ZNi>.

For more information about Smokey Bear, visit <https://smokeybear.com/en>, or #SmokeyBearHug.

For a 1960 rendering of the Smokey Bear theme song on an MDC-sponsored radio broadcast, visit <https://short.mdc.mo.gov/ZN5>.