

Mohawk State Forest

Prescribed Burn

David Irvin, Burn Boss Trainee



DEEP Forestry successfully implemented a prescribed fire on the summit of Mohawk Mountain in Cornwall on April 29. This popular overlook in Mohawk State Forest requires continuous vegetation management to maintain the vista on two sides of the mountain. In the past, time-consuming and labor intensive cutting was used to keep the vista open, but the area is generally too steep and rocky for mowing or brush-hogging equipment. Herbicide control has also been used in 2013.

Late in 2013, the State Parks Division approached Forestry about the possibility of using fire as a management tool to control the vegetation, as well as to consume the increasing fuels on the site from previous controls, and therefore reduce wildfire potential and the need to use pesticides repeatedly. David Irvin, the State Lands Forester for Mohawk, authored a burn plan for the project.

Prescribed fire has long been a management tool of Forestry, and is used in Connecticut most often to help maintain native grasses for wildlife habitat and in forest management to help regenerate and maintain forest types that are disturbance dependent, such as oak and pitch pine.

At Mohawk, two sites, one on the north slope and one on the south slope of the summit, were burned separately on the same day. The total between the two areas was 3 acres. The preparation to safely and effectively implement the burns took several days, for creation of firebreaks, contingency lines, and escape routes for staff safety. And the potential for mountaintop wind and up-slope effects on fire behavior were considerable, requiring a great deal of planning and careful, skilled ignition patterns to keep control and reduce potential for spot fires during the most intense burning.

North Slope



South Slope



A total of 18 DEEP staff assisted in the burn, a truly cooperative effort between Forestry, Parks, Wildlife, and Support Services. Many of the staff are also part of the Connecticut Interstate Fire Crew (CIFC). Drip torches (which use a 3:1 mixture of diesel: gasoline) were used to ignite for a total of 2-1/4 hours between the two areas, using care to first allow the fire to back against the wind or downslope to create “black” safe areas at control lines.



Then each fire was slowly flanked by two different lighters. Eventually, when approximately half to two-thirds of the areas had burned, the downslope edges were lit, closing the rings and finishing the operations. All hot spots and “smokes” were cooled and mopped up before staff left for the day.

The mountain was closed to public access on all trails and roads during the day of the burn

DEEP even had the rare and unusual opportunity to post a safety “lookout” for the burns in an actual fire tower overlooking both sites. The last functioning fire tower actively used in the State of Connecticut is on the summit of Mohawk Mountain (discontinued in the mid-1980s), and is a truly historic structure.

David Irvin was a Burn Boss Trainee for the operation, under Emery Gluck (Forestry Division), who has years of experience leading controlled burns in Connecticut. There were other individuals who also received training and evaluations at this assignment for new qualifications on wildfires. The project provided an excellent opportunity for a staff refresher on fire suppression skills as the state entered a peak for the annual spring fire season.

The burn was also an exercise in public outreach with the community. The mountain summit is visible for miles around in a number of towns, so it was important to plan a program of outreach to get the word out in advance of the operation. Numerous phone calls were made to officials in the towns of Goshen and Cornwall, flyers were posted in town halls and libraries, as well as at Mohawk, and DEEP Communications sent a press release two days prior to the burn.

As a whole, results of the day surpassed all predictions for achieving objectives. Mountain peaks normally provide much higher wind speeds and more frequent wind than seen in valleys at lower elevations. This means a greater challenge to find “windows” to safely implement a burn. But DEEP was able to reach all objectives in one perfect day, and to do so safely and with professionalism and control.

The burn was a success due to excellent inter-disciplinary coordination, and was a terrific Forestry and State Parks collaboration!

