

Wildfires—something to be concerned about

I'd been catching up on some email when Bob announced his arrival. "Hey look at this! It's 5:00 and still light outside—Spring is just around the corner. Hallelujah!" Once he noticed me hovering over my laptop, he asked "What're you reading?"

"Just some e-newsletters." And then thinking about an email from the Town, I asked, "Other than hurricanes, flooding, storms and coastal shoreline erosion, guess what another potential threat we should be aware of here on the Cape?"

"Hmmm." He thought for a minute. "I know, must be invasive species. Yes, that's it--alien plants that will take over the Cape while we're sleeping." He laughed. "You're always telling me about nasty non-native invasives!"

"Wrong!" I crowed. "It's wildfires."

"Wildfires!" he echoed. "In all the years I've lived on Cape Cod, I can't recall one wildfire. Sure houses catch fire because someone left a candle burning or something. But a wildfire? Where do you get this information?"

"It's true. A Forest Service study found that Barnstable and Plymouth counties, with sandy soils, drying winds, and fuel sources like pine and oak are as wildfire prone as the often fire-ravaged regions of southern California. And, in a July 1, 2000 report from the Forest Fire Protection Committee of the National Association of State Foresters, the lack of national public awareness about potential wildfire danger was cited as a major national concern. Few people are aware of the Cape's potential wildfire danger. You, Bob, are a case in point."

"Thank you. But we don't have large tracts of forest like other parts of the country."

"But we do have enough forested land—thank goodness. During the early 1900's, naturally occurring forest fires were abundant on Cape Cod, and an average of 8,500 acres of woodland burned annually. With increased development and less forested area, wildfires aren't as frequent. But consider that during the last two decades many new homes have been built in a forest environment or are located adjacent to town owned open space land. The advantages to such properties are obvious. But a downside is the potential for a devastating wildfire. Large wildfires may still occur."

"So, ah, what arouses your interest in this subject, Smokey?" he asked.

"I'm reading an email from the Town of Chatham about fire protection plans that were prepared through a grant from the County for the Goose Pond Complex and the Town Forest. Goals of the plans are to reduce wildfire hazard, increase firefighter and public safety, and reduce the threat of wildfire to property and life on lands adjacent to these areas through education and awareness."

"And how will they do that?" Bob asked.

“Well, distribute informational materials to homeowners giving tips for protecting their properties, make sure the access for firefighters is clear, the mechanical removal of fuel or..... one of the methods that has been used in other towns on the Cape and at the National Seashore is a prescribed burn--a controlled, deliberately set, small and very slow burning fire.”

“That sounds dangerous. And what’s the point?”

“It’s not at all dangerous. As I said, other towns on Cape Cod like Barnstable, as well as the National Seashore, have used prescribed burns as part of their management to reduce the hazard. Some of the benefits include decreasing underbrush and therefore the potential for dangerous wildfires, improvement of soil fertility, improved diversity of plant, insect, small animal, and bird communities, AND *decrease undesirable and invasive plant species.*”

“There you have it! Those invasive species again! I knew that was part of it.” He sounded as though he’d just uncovered a conspiracy.

“You got me, Bob.” I humored him. “So, why don’t you start a slow burn right here in the fireplace, and I’ll get the drinks.” I could see we’d have to continue this conversation another time.

Some links to related material:

www.firewise.org

www.chatham-ma.gov/Public_Documents/ChathamMA_WLFPP/index

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