

Long Standing Multi-Agency Cooperation Key to Protecting Whiting Home From a Wildfire

April 18, 2012 - Contact: Lt. Jeffrey Currier, 441-2580



A wildfire approaches a home on Route 1 in Whiting, Maine. Photo credit: Maine Forest Service.

A WILDFIRE reported on Route 1 near the Dodge Road in Whiting just after 5:00 on Wednesday sent firefighters from the Whiting Fire Department and Forest Rangers from the Maine Forest Service into action. The fire, sparked from a permitted blueberry field burn at the residence of Calvin Burtain, was growing rapidly when firefighters arrived. The fire was being fueled by gusty winds and extremely dry fuel conditions, and was one of over a dozen reported in Maine on Wednesday.

According to Maine Forest Ranger Ryan Maker, the homeowner had acquired an open burning permit for his planned fire, and he had adhered to all of the requirements listed on the permit. However, the fire just proved too much to contain and began

spreading toward the woods and another home. Firefighters from Whiting, Lubec and Ranger Lt. Jeff Currier joined Maker at the call and immediately began to attack the fire.

“It was clear that this fire had potential and was heading toward another home,” Ranger Ryan Maker said. “Fire Chief Craig Smith and I were formulating a plan when Lt. Currier arrived in one of our HMMWVs,” he added. The HMMWV stands for High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle and was acquired by the Maine Forest Service through the federal excess property program. The forest service acquires surplus military equipment for the forest rangers, as well as for municipal fire departments. The equipment is received at no cost to the state and

helps to provide forest rangers with specialized equipment for their forest protection and law enforcement missions.

Whiting Fire Chief Craig Smith is also employed by the Department of Corrections at the Downeast Correctional Facility in Machiasport. He serves as a vocational instructor, specializing in welding trades. The HMMWV that Currier brought to the fire was one which Smith had recently helped to refurbish and equip at the prison with his inmate welding students. At the facility, Smith and his crew were able to construct a 180 gallon water tank, hook up the water pump and built a roof for the vehicle, which often are made only with soft canvas tops. Smith and his crew have been able to help

the forest service put 8 of these vehicles in service, saving the forest service thousands of dollars.

As the fire moved quickly toward a residence, the rangers and chief decided that the HMMWV should be used to cut the head of the fire off, protecting the home from damage. Currier drove the unit across the front lawn of the home and positioned it in between it and the fire. Using the pump on the truck to pump water, the fire chief and rangers went to work knocking down the fire, which had flames lengths of 6 to 8 feet.

“It was burning very hot, and was not going to be stopped with backpumps,” Ranger Maker said, “So the HMMWV was our best option.”

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Within 15 minutes, the fire crews had the fire knocked down before it could damage the home. The fire scorched 12 acres before being brought under control.

“It was so neat to have something that I helped to design and build be put to use,” Whiting Fire Chief Craig Smith said. “It isn’t often that I get to see the fruits of my labor from my regular job being put to the test,” he added.

According to Lt. Currier, the Department of Corrections and the Department of Conservation, Maine Forest Service have collaborated in many areas of the state for many years. Maine’s Forest Rangers train inmate wildfire crews each year, so that they can be deployed to assist rangers and local fire crews on wildfires statewide. This effort includes inmate crews at Downeast Correctional

Facility, the Charleston Correctional Facility and the Maine State Prison in Warren. Currier said that the cooperation goes beyond fire crews and includes carpentry, building maintenance, metal fabrication and a host of other trades.

“This cooperation has saved Maine taxpayers a ton of money over the years,” Currier said. “We have also provided opportunities for inmate

students, through their vocational instructors, to develop skills which will help them contribute when they are released.”

Currier added, “We are proud of our cooperation with the Department of Corrections. In other places you hear of government discord, you won’t find that with us. It is not the Maine way of doing business.”



HMMWV (above) as it was being worked on at Downeast Correctional Facility, and the completed HMMWV (below) and the house that was being protected in the background. Photo credit: Maine Forest Service.

