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Rx for the Pine Barrens: Fire

📅 May 22, 2021 👤 Beth Young 💬 0 Comments

Pictured above: Conducting a prescribed burn with the New York Wildfire & Incident Management Academy in the fall of 2015.

While much of the Long Island we see as we go about our lives is a built environment of shopping malls and housing developments, you don't have to get far off the beaten track to find vast acreage of pitch pine and oak forests, which sit atop a sandy soil that filters all the water we will eventually drink from the island's taps.

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the woods and melt the resin in pine cones, which then open and release their seeds, spreading new life throughout the forest.

Long Island's pine barrens are unique in many ways, but one of the most startling ways they are unique among other pine barrens ecosystems throughout the eastern United States is the lack of use of prescribed fire to protect the ecosystem and the surrounding communities.

This fact is a driving force behind the new Central Pine Barrens Comprehensive Prescribed Fire Management Plan, released by the Central Pine Barrens Joint Planning and Policy Commission on April 30.

"It may seem ironic that fire is the best tool we have to prevent devastating wildfires and ensure the continued health of the spectacular Central Pine Barrens region, but that is the case for many reasons," said the commission's Interim Executive Director Judy Jakobsen. "This plan, which builds upon decades of prescribed fire management in the region, will provide jurisdictions with the guidance to conduct prescribed fires in a holistic and scientific manner."

According to the plan, "the Central Pine Barrens is really the last example of this type of habitat and ecosystem that is not being actively managed with prescribed fire, and that lack of management has led to continuing declines in the health of the ecosystem and the species that reside here, gradually deteriorating the ecosystem services provisions that the citizenry relies on, while steadily increasing the risk to human health and property from increasing wildfire risk."

The 161-page plan was drafted by the Central Pine Barrens Commission with \$1.25 million in funding from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

According to the plan, Long Island's pine barrens need a "program that is routine and administered on a continuous basis. This routine effectively manifests as a program that is burning small to moderate sized acreages throughout the entire year, when environmental conditions allow, to meet a variety of restoration and maintenance objectives. Prescribed fire management needs to become a very regular and recurring effort with burning happening nearly every week and multiple days per week."

The plan outlines five distinct fire management areas, called Fire Management Unites (FMUs), in Rocky Point, Brookhaven, Manorville-Calverton, the Dwarf Pines of Westhampton and the Southampton FMU, which is comprised of Flanders and a portion of East Quogue. It provides specific examples of acreage within these areas that could best be managed by prescribe fire.

"Compared to some regions of the country, the Central Pine Barrens region has had little exposure to, or familiarity with, any kind of prescribed fire and/or forestry management practices, especially relating to fire in woodland environments,"



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Those benefits include making the woods safer for volunteer firefighters who are charged with putting out wildfires through what’s known as a “direct attack,” an aggressive attempt to put out a wildfire before it can burn large acreages.

“Direct attack methods, especially using local brush trucks, have regularly been demonstrated as costly both to human safety and equipment,” according to the plan. “These vehicles frequently get stuck or impacted by trees, exposing firefighters to risks of entrapment, blunt force trauma and burn-over. Direct interior attack of all burning fuels deep within a wildfire has also caused firefighter exposure to other hazards including cumulative exposure to smoke.”

In recent years, and as more housing developments have been built in the center of this ecosystem, local fire departments have been focused on using these direct attacks to suppress wildfires before they reach catastrophic proportions like they did in the 1995 Sunrise Wildfires, and in another major fire known as Crescent Bow, which ignited just off the grounds of Brookhaven National Laboratory in 2012.

“We all saw firsthand in 1995 how devastating a wildfire can be,” said Town of Southampton Supervisor and Commission Member Jay Schneiderman. “That experience demonstrated the need for the type of coordinated effort to protect the region that the Central Pine Barrens Commission’s fire management plan addresses.”

“Prescribed fire is the most ecologically appropriate, economically feasible and beneficial tool available to address the important issues outlined in the prescribed fire management plan,” said Town of Riverhead Supervisor and Commission Member Yvette Aguiar.

Housing developments adjacent to wildlands, known in wildfire lingo as the Wildland Urban Interface, or the WUI, are in great need of protection from wildfire. The protection of these areas was one of the primary focuses of the Ridge-Manorville-Calverton Community Wildfire Protection Plan, completed by the Central Pine Barrens Commission in 2016 in the wake of the Crescent Bow fire, with federal funding through the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003.

That protection plan enabled the Central Pine Barrens Commission to do site assessments of houses in those communities, offering suggestions for how to make the properties more safe.

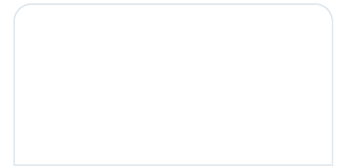
Those suggestions include asking homeowners to not plant evergreen foundation plantings, to clean all leaves from the 30-foot area surrounding their house, and to not install wood fencing that can act as a fuse leading up to houses.

Recommendations also include cleaning leaves out of gutters and screening the vent openings on homes.

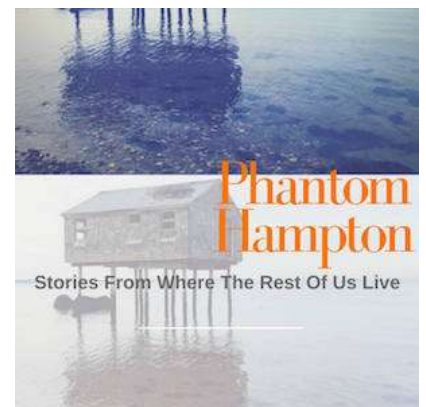


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DEC firefighters at an April 20 controlled burn in Rocky Point. | Courtesy DEC

The threat of fire in Long Island’s pine barrens has been exacerbated by the damage caused in recent years by the arrival of the southern pine beetle, whose favorite source of food is the pitch pines that make up the pine barrens, and by the death of many oak trees within the ecosystem after a gypsy moth caterpillar invasion in the mid-2000s. Many of these dead oak trees remain in the woods, adding fuel to any potential fire.

The plan outlines the benefits prescribed fire provides in both removing the excess fuel caused by these dead trees, and also in controlling pests like the southern pine beetle and the wide array of disease-carrying ticks that call our local woods home.

This pest management is one of the driving forces behind controlled burns the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation began this spring at the Rocky Point Pine Barrens State Forest, through an ecological research operation to determine how best to manage the southern pine beetle invasion, funded by a 2017 U.S. Forest Service grant.

Other prescribed fire efforts are underway by the DEC at the Otis Pike Pine Barrens State Forest just south of EPCAL in Calverton and preparations for prescribed fire are currently underway in David Sarnoff Pine Barrens State Forest just off of Route 104 in Riverside, according to the commission.

“This plan is exactly what is needed to ensure that the Central Pine Barrens will be in 30 years every bit as ecologically significant, functional and picturesque as the region conserved by local leaders nearly 30 years ago,” said Rob Cole, forester of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.



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management practices on county public lands within the Central Pine Barrens and especially for helping ensure that parklands remain safe and available for public recreation," said Suffolk County Director of Sustainability and Chief Recovery Officer Dorian Dale.

You can read and download the entire plan online at pb.state.ny.us/our-work. Click on the "Prescribed Fire Management Program" option.

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Beth Young

Beth Young has been covering the East End since the 1990s. In her spare time, she runs around the block, tinkers with bicycles, tries not to drown in the Peconic Bay and hopes to grow the perfect tomato. You can send her a message at editor@eastendbeacon.com

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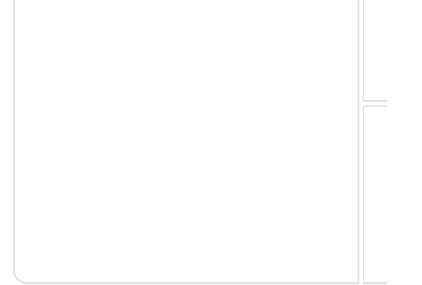
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