

REAL ESTATE

Long Island brush fires: How homeowners near Sunrise Highway were impacted



Wildfires that raged on the East End evoked memories of the 1995 blaze. Credit: Newsday/Steve Pfost

By Rachel Weiss

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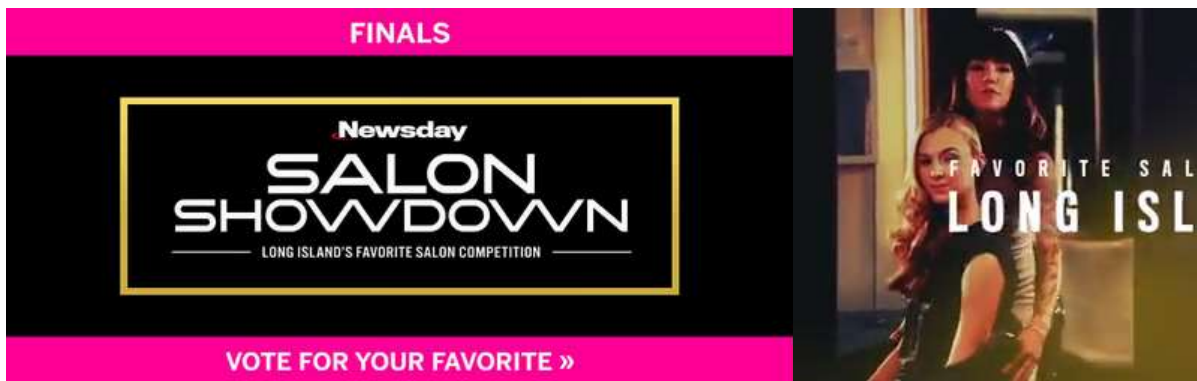
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Mariah Ostler was driving from her brother's wedding in Maryland with her family when she first heard about the fires.

As friends sent her photos and videos of the smoke, "everything started to look familiar," said Ostler, 34, who lives in the Eastport area.

Then she realized: It was happening right by her exit on Sunrise Highway.



"The kids started getting upset," said Ostler, whose three children are 13, 11 and 9 years old. "And they're like, 'Are we gonna have to be evacuated?' And we were trying to take it all in and figure out what's going on before we jumped to conclusions."

The family started to piece together a plan in the event of an evacuation by the time they arrived home. Ostler's mind immediately went to the recent wildfires in California. Even though her property is surrounded by woods, she never thought something like this could happen in her own backyard.

“ It made me realize that I don't think my family is prepared for something like this.”

— Mariah Ostler, of Eastport

"It made me realize that I don't think my family is prepared for something like this," Ostler said. "What do you grab? I feel like the answer is, you just grab each other. So I feel like we should be more prepared, so there's a lesson there, too."

Last weekend, [four separate brush fires](#) broke out in eastern Suffolk County, affecting Center Moriches, East Moriches, Eastport and Westhampton. The blaze shocked some residents, while for others it evoked memories of the [Sunrise Fire of 1995](#), which burned through thousands of wooded acres around Westhampton.

Lessons from frontlines of Sunrise Fire of 1995



In August 1995, firefighters stood on a mound at the Westhampton Transfer Station on Old Country Road. Credit: Newsday / Bill Davis

“It's part of living out here. After 50 years of doing this, it has to be expected every now and then.”

— Steve Frano, Westhampton Beach Fire Department member and former chief

Steve Frano was on the frontlines of both the 1995 fire and the recent blazes in eastern Suffolk. He has been a member of the Westhampton Beach Fire Department for 50 years, formerly serving as its chief and fire marshal for the Town of Southampton.

"I could see when we were driving down the road that it was bad," said Frano, 74.

He spent five hours battling blazes Saturday among every other fire department in the county, Frano said. For many volunteers there, this was their first big fire, he added.

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"When you're in the woods, especially now since we have a problem with [the pine beetle](#), the trees will break in half and come right down on top of you so easy now, which made it more dangerous than anything else," said Frano. "You

have to be very cognizant of your entire surroundings, and then you have the fire."

As for homeowners, Frano has some advice: "Any dry brush that's close to your house, cut it back," he said. "Because if it's right up against the house and it's all dried and dead and a small ember gets in, then the outside of your house catches on fire."

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Ostler said she'll be more on top of cleaning up the leaves and debris around her backyard.

"Essentially that's just a risk of a fire, and I never thought about it like that and I didn't think we'd be in this position," she said.

Ostler is grateful for the efforts of Frano and all of the firefighters on the scene last weekend.

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"All of our communities are nestled in the pine barrens," she said. "So our backyard is just a continuation of the pine barrens. If those firefighters and volunteers hadn't stopped that blaze, our backyards would just be engulfed, and I don't even want to think about what else, and the amount of homes that would have been destroyed."

Frano will be honored as the grand marshal of the [Westhampton Beach St. Patrick's Day Parade](#) on March 15. The theme of this year's parade is a fitting one: volunteerism, with members of several fire departments marching in the festivities.

As a lifelong resident of Westhampton Beach, Frano said his family had to evacuate their home in 1995. This time, he wasn't worried about his house.

"It's part of living out here," he said of the fires. "After 50 years of doing this, it has to be expected every now and then."



The Sunrise Fire of 1995 took place in summer and overtook thousands of acres of nearby woods. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas

“It was the first year my mom had bought her house up there. She was out there freaking out.”

— Lisha Jones Terry, of Westhampton, recalling the Sunrise Fire of 1995

Lisha Jones Terry, of Westhampton, was in Bay Shore when she heard about the fires last weekend. She took it seriously, remembering where she was during the fires that swept both sides of Sunrise Highway 30 years ago.

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"It was the first year my mom had bought her house up there," said Terry, now 48. "She was out there freaking out. They were telling her to leave, but she was hosing down her roof. She had just bought the house and it was a struggle to buy the house; she was a single mother and she had worked so hard for that house."

The fire came close to her property line but otherwise the house suffered no damage, and her mother still lives there, Terry said.

"I remember putting artwork in a van, and taking the artwork to safety for that person," Terry said. She recalls smoke going through the van, and the artist being "terrified!"

"But it was so long ago, I don't even know who it was," she said.

Since then, art has become a passion for Terry, who combines acrylic paint with things she collects along the beach in her community. She displayed her work at an exhibit for the first time the day before the fires.

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When Terry's sons, ages 18 and 15, voluntarily left their Westhampton home last Saturday, they grabbed a few items on their way out. Among them: Terry's own artwork.

"I thought that was really cute," she said.

'Bad combination' of weather factors this weekend



The aftermath in the pine barrens in Westhampton Beach after the wildfires on Tuesday. Credit: Randee Daddona

The conditions that led to the fires were a "bad combination" of weather factors, said J. Bret Bennington, chair of the department of geology, environment and sustainability at Hofstra University.

"Even though we had quite a bit of rain recently, in the last few days, the humidity has been very low," he said on Monday. "And we had these high winds, and that dries things out pretty quickly. The sandy soils in the pine barrens don't hold onto moisture very long; it drains through them very quickly."

It doesn't take much for fires to start in a climate like the pine barrens, Bennington added: From a cigarette butt to, more commonly for wildfires, a lightning strike.

“A lot of wildlife have nowhere to go in situations like that.”

— Tracy Cronin, of the East End

Tracy Cronin, a real estate broker with Gold Coast Homes in Westhampton Beach, said many residents are concerned about the wildlife in the area. Some even offered their trailers to help people transport horses from their properties, if needed. The Town of Brookhaven, which includes parts of Eastport and Manorville, allows [two horses per acre on residential property](#).

"A lot of wildlife have nowhere to go in situations like that," Cronin said. "Long Islanders love animals."

Fortunately, the recent fires were brought under control before becoming "a huge catastrophe," Bennington said.

"It's a really interesting and unique ecosystem," he said of the pine barrens. "It's fascinating that you have an ecosystem that's actually adapted to be dependent on fire."

The fires rejuvenate the pine barrens in several ways, including by releasing nutrients into the soil and creating clearings that animals depend on, Bennington added.

"We can't think of wildfires as something abnormal," he said. "They're a normal part of the functioning of that ecosystem."



By **Rachel Weiss**

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Rachel Weiss joined Newsday in 2016. As a real estate/living multimedia reporter, Rachel writes feature stories and contributes to and appears in on-camera video packages. She was the lead reporter on Newsday's LI Acts of Kindness series.

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