NEWS RELEASE

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Date:	March 3, 2011		Release No. MFO-03-11
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Spring winds bring increased danger of wildfires

MORGANTOWN, WVa.— As winter draws to a close, residents of the Northeast and Midwest should take precautions for the next season—fire season. The month of March brings spring rains, but it also brings winds that can quickly dry out last fall's leaves and dead grasses.

Without leaves on the trees, the warm rays of the sun reach the forest floor, which dries out and warms woody materials that can fuel a wildfire. During spring and fall, daily changes in wind, moisture, and temperature can quickly turn the forests and grasslands of the Northeast and Midwest into a tinderbox waiting for a spark.

State forestry agencies have already responded to numerous wildfires in West Virginia, Maryland, Missouri, and New Jersey. "Extra precautions are needed during this time of year to avoid starting a wildfire. Many State forestry agencies have regulations that limit certain activities in an effort to reduce the number of wildfires," said Billy Terry, Assistant Director for Cooperative Fire Management for Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry, a unit of the U.S. Forest Service.

In a typical spring, the wildfire season can begin soon after the snow leaves the ground and the air begins warming, as reflected by the fact that most fires occur in March and April. When conditions are right and a wildfire is ignited, it can consume from several to several hundred acres in a short period of time. Most of the wildfires are extinguished within a day.

Because many people live in the Northeast and Midwest, there is an abundance of what is called the wildland-urban interface—an intimate association of wildfire fuels and human dwellings. Therefore, almost every wildfire that occurs has the potential to threaten homes and other structures. The spring wildfire season ends when leaves emerge on trees.

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The West Virginia Division of Forestry prohibits all outdoor burning from 7 a.m. until 4 p.m. from March 1 through May 31. Residents may burn vegetative materials, including brush, leaves, and limbs, but only after 4 p.m.

The Maryland Forest Service is reporting an early and active spring fire season this year. Maryland experienced extreme fire weather brought about by changing weather systems in February. In one weekend, 30 wildfires ranging in size from 1 acre to 652 acres burned more than 2,244 acres of forests, fields, and grasslands. Three homes and 23 other structures were destroyed, and another 8 homes were damaged in the weekend wildfires.

The Maryland Forest Service, on average, responds to 660 wildfires every year that burn about 3,600 acres. In the first 2 months of this year, 57 wildfires have burned more than 7,900 acres of forests, fields, and grasslands. Statistics from 2000 to 2006 show that more wildfires occur during March and April than in other months.

Spring fire season has also started in Missouri with intensity this year. In mid-February, 16 wildfires caused by humans burned more than 2,490 acres. Wildfire also destroyed one barn.

New Jersey has historically experienced 1,500 fires that burn 7,000 acres every year. As of February 22 of this year, the New Jersey Forest Fire Service has responded to 87 fires that burned 143 acres.

In 2010, humans caused 15,675 fires that burned over 128,000 acres in the 20 States of the Northeast and Midwest. Wildfires in this region are most often caused by debris burning, arson, and ignition from equipment.

Where debris burning is allowed, forestry officials suggest the following tips:

• Be prepared: create a 10-foot perimeter around the fire so that if it does get away from you it won't spread too far.

• Keep a rake, shovel, and water source nearby in case the fire does escape.

• If the fire spreads into the woods, call 911 immediately. Understand the local rules and regulations for open air burning

• Never burn on a windy day.

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The Forest Service works cooperatively with State forestry agencies to provide funding and resources for wildfire protection efforts. This partnership dates back to March 1911 when President Taft signed the Weeks Act, which permitted the Federal government to purchase private land to protect the headwaters of rivers and watersheds in the Eastern United States.

Another provision of the Act directed the Secretary of Agriculture to cooperatively work with any State(s) to organize and maintain a fire protection system on any private or State forest lands.

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Average number of wildfires per month 2000-2006

http://www.dnr.state.md.us/forests/fire/pdfs/averagebymonth.pdf