

## **PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**

### **Have You Thought About Forest Fires Lately?**

By Bill Fortune

We are all used to hearing about wildfires in the western part of the country, especially California as of late. We have heard the numbers on the millions of acres of forest that have burned this year and have seen the charred images of the aftermath.

Let's think about what optimizes our little campfire or better yet our big forest fire. Most of us know that it takes three basic components for fire to occur: fuel; oxygen; spark. We know that without any one of these you can't have a fire. The concentration of oxygen in the atmosphere is constant at 20.9%. The big variable here is wind. Wind intensifies forest fires and forest fires can create their own wind that help further intensify them. We really don't have much control over the oxygen/wind component.

Spark is something we have a little more control over. Unfortunately, several of the worst forest fires were deliberately set by arsonists with several more set by carelessness or stupidity. How many fires have been started by throwing a cigarette out of a car window or leaving a campfire unattended? The spark arrester on my chain saw muffler recently came out. I was amazed on the amount of sparks it was blowing on the dry ground. It was apparent that I better get this fixed. There a thousand more examples on how sparks are made that are all avoidable but lightning strikes are one source of sparks that are essentially unavoidable.

Fuel is the biggest but most complex variable of our forest fire equation and it's something as managers of our forests we have significant control over. It is obvious that the denser and drier the forest the more it increases the potential of the magnitude of a forest fire. There are several other elements that need consideration here. Thinning forests, removing standing dead wood, creating fire breaks, and having more people on the ready to watch for and be prepared to fight fires help lower the risks and destructiveness of a forest fire but all of this takes resources.

Here in RI, dryness is the factor that has got my attention lately. The combination of a record hot summer and near record summer drought has made the woods around here bone dry. That in combination with all the still standing dead wood as a result of the gypsy moth defoliation and general poor forest management for forest fire suppression are a good recipe for a significant forest fire. We need to recognize that we are not immune to the threat of forest fire here in Rhode Island. Lately I have been in the woods knocking down standing dead, especially white pine, and maintaining my fire roads to reduce the risk of potential forest fire damage. We also need to recognize that with climate change we can expect the potential for forest fires to increase.

The current COVID pandemic we are caught in draws many parallels with forest fires. There are a few individuals that are constantly thinking about threat level, worst case scenario and prevention

even when the threat is low and out of the spotlight. As we know most, these issues usually draw our attention only when we are in crisis mode. Perhaps we should direct a little more of our attention towards forest fire suppression before we are indeed in crisis mode.