



Commonwealth of Virginia
Office of the Governor

Executive Order

NUMBER FORTY (2024)

ENHANCING COORDINATION AND COMMUNICATION AND BOLSTERING WILDFIRE INCIDENT COMMAND OPERATIONS

By virtue of the authority vested in me as Governor of the Commonwealth, I hereby issue this Executive Order to enhance collaboration and emergency preparedness between state agencies who work to keep all Virginians safe against the threat of wildfires around the Commonwealth.

Importance of the Initiative

The Commonwealth of Virginia is committed to ensuring the safety and protection of its citizens, natural resources, and property from the threat of wildfires. Effective communication and coordination between state agencies are crucial to responding to and managing wildfire incidents. To enhance the Commonwealth's preparedness and response coordination, it is essential that one state agency serves as lead for wildfire response and incident command operations, ensuring that all relevant information is centralized and communicated effectively. This Order provides guidance specifically related to managing significant wildfire activity to augment the operational plans outlined in the Commonwealth of Virginia Emergency Operations Plan (COVEOP).

Forests cover nearly two-thirds of the lands of Virginia, over 16 million acres. These forests provide a wide range of critical services and environmental benefits including protecting water quality, increasing ground water recharge, improving air quality, providing wildlife habitats, and allowing open space for recreation and scenic beauty that make Virginia a beautiful place to live, work, and raise a family. These same forests also provide the raw materials for Virginia's third largest industry, which employs over 108,000 people.

Virginia's forests have historically been associated with fire. Fire was a tool used extensively by native peoples to manage the landscape. Since colonial times, intentional and unintentional fires significantly impacted the forest. Modern wildland firefighting has significantly decreased

the extent of the forest burned each year. The lack of natural or historic fire regimes leaves forests more at risk from wildfires.

Reintroducing beneficial fires to the forest is an important strategy to restore healthy ecosystems and reduce the amount of fuel available for wildfires. Land managers today emphasize the use of prescribed fire, for the multiple benefits “good fire” brings to the forest. Prescribed fire—setting intentional, controlled fires with a specific goal—is a necessary and useful tool to prevent dangerous wildfires and manage landscapes for long-term ecological health. Prescribed fire is used to promote many benefits, including maintaining oak and pine savannas, restoring wildlife habitat, controlling pests and invasive plants, and clearing forest brush, leaves and debris—also known as “fuel”—that can promote larger and more destructive wildfires.

Wildfires have the potential to harm property, livelihoods, and human health. Unfortunately, fire-related threats are only increasing, as more people live in and near forests and other natural areas. At the same time, the number of homes being built within or near forests has greatly increased. The Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) has identified 5,385 woodland home communities that are potentially at risk from wildfire.

Annual wildfire suppression efforts are credited with protecting an average of more than 2,800 homes and other buildings with a total value protected of over \$179 million each year. Virginia has a proud tradition of safe and aggressive initial attack in response to wildfire. Because of the coordinated efforts of DOF and the over 600 local fire departments across Virginia, most people are unaware of the hundreds of wildfires that occur every year in the Commonwealth.

Over the past 20 years, on average, DOF suppressed 779 fires that burned 10,686 acres annually. These fires damaged or destroyed an average of 91 structures per year with a total estimated loss of \$1.96 million annually.

This year, DOF has responded to 352 fires, with 92% containment in the first 24-hour period. There are many more fires—perhaps five times as many fires—handled by local fire departments, showing Virginia’s network of DOF full-time and part-time firefighters working closely with local fire departments has been able to effectively handle initial attack in most cases.

Two-and-a-half million acres of Virginia’s forests fall under the management of federal agencies including the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The DOF maintains an active cooperative agreement with each of these agencies to allow for enhanced cooperation on all wildfires impacting the Commonwealth. Through this agreement, all wildland fire suppression agencies in Virginia share resources and respond in a cross-boundary approach, with a mutual purpose of suppressing wildfires as efficiently as possible, to protect life and infrastructure.

Drought conditions during the fall of 2023 and a significant wind event during the spring of 2024 resulted in significant wildfire activity that burned 44,348 acres. This is more acres burned in Virginia in a six-month period than at any time in the last 30 years, almost five times more than the 20-year average for the same period.

The need to protect life and property must be balanced with the need to provide for firefighter safety. Firefighters are driven by duty to protect lives and property and are often forced to put their own lives at risk to do so. The increasing prevalence of woodland homes that lack adequate preventative measures to withstand wildfire puts more firefighters in peril. Aggressive initial attacks help to reduce overall firefighter risk by keeping fires small so that fewer resources are needed.

During significant wildfire activity, fire size and complexity can result in the need for greater resources and greater coordination. This level of response is managed through the Incident Management Team (IMT) approach. This organizational system that is now used for any large-scale event, was developed in response to the complexity of managing large wildfires. For this reason, forestry agencies like the DOF employ the greatest number of trained IMT staff.

Directive

Accordingly, pursuant to the authority vested in me as the Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth, and pursuant to Article V, §§ 1 and 7 of the Constitution of Virginia and the laws of the Commonwealth, I hereby direct my administration to implement the following measures to enhance our state's preparedness and response capabilities in responding to wildfires here in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This Order establishes a necessary plan for the included state agencies to successfully accomplish their COVEOP assigned responsibilities, as outlined in COVEOP Item Six, "Planning Assumptions."

1. Designation of Lead Agency:

- The Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) is hereby designated as the lead agency for incident command operations in all wildfire-related emergencies within the Commonwealth of Virginia.
 - Va. Code § 10.1-1136 designates DOF forest wardens to serve as forest fire incident commander and perform other duties as needed in the management and suppression of forest fire incidents.
 - DOF has a long history of working in Unified Incident Command with local fire services and with the state and federal land-holding agencies.
 - DOF shall continue to support and engage in the cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure prompt initial response while respecting jurisdictional authorities.

2. Enhanced Communication During Significant Wildfire Activity:

- DOF shall enhance its communication strategy during significant wildfire activity by implementing the following measures:
 - **Routine Updates:** DOF shall commit to providing three scheduled updates per day, including morning and evening briefings, and an additional midday update to relay the status of the wildfire, resources on scene, requested resources, and forecasts for containment.
 - **Simplified Reporting:** DOF shall develop a new, simplified method for describing fire status, transitioning from traditional metrics such as percentage contained or controlled, and focusing instead on key factors such as resource deployment and expected containment timelines.
 - **Public and Citizen Safety Communications:** DOF shall ensure that all impacted citizens and the general public receive timely updates and safety messages. This will be achieved by dedicating additional staff and providing specialized training for public information roles.
 - **Elected Officials Liaison:** DOF shall designate a communications liaison for local and state elected officials, ensuring they receive accurate and timely information directly from the Unified Incident Command.

3. Communication and Coordination:

- The Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM), the Virginia Department of Fire Programs (VDFP), and other relevant state and local agencies shall coordinate closely with Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) in all wildfire incident responses.
- All information regarding wildfire incidents, including situational reports, resource needs, and operational updates, shall be communicated to and through DOF before any request for additional resources is made.
- DOF shall ensure that there is effective communication between the Unified Incident Command and local officials and emergency operations staff regarding fire status, potential community impacts, and resource needs.

4. Incident Command Structure:

- DOF shall establish and maintain a clear and effective incident command structure for wildfire emergencies, ensuring that all participating agencies understand their roles and responsibilities.
- To ensure consistency and accuracy in public and internal communications, all Commonwealth entities must utilize the information generated by the Unified Incident Command as the sole source for official updates.

5. Resource Allocation:

- All resource requests related to wildfire management must originate from the Unified Incident Command, which includes DOF, local fire departments, the Virginia Department of Fire Programs (VDFP), and where applicable, federal agencies.
- VDEM shall ensure that any wildfire resource requests submitted through the WebEOC, or changes to resource orders, originate from or are approved by the Unified Incident Command. This includes requests for logistical, operational and communications assistance as well as for critical wildfire resources such as trained wildland firefighters, brush trucks, and aircraft.
- DOF shall coordinate with VDEM for requests involving the Virginia National Guard or other logistical needs such as fuel or food, when appropriate.

6. Development of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to bolster firefighting capacity:

- DOF and VDFP are directed to create and formalize a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) based on the following guidelines:
 - The MOU shall establish and maintain a cooperative agreement to provide personnel and incident management resources in support of emergency incidents, with a focus on wildfire management.
 - The MOU shall recognize DOF's statutory responsibility to prevent and extinguish forest fires and VDFP's' role in providing technical expertise and support to Virginia's fire services.
 - The agreement shall outline national level training, credentialing, resource sharing, and reimbursement processes necessary to support DOF during periods of elevated wildfire occurrence or other emergencies.
 - Both agencies shall ensure that information flow, situational awareness, and logistical support are enhanced through this cooperative agreement, with clear roles and responsibilities defined for each agency to assist in coordination and preparedness efforts.

7. Development of a Wildfire Annex for the Commonwealth of Virginia Emergency Operations Plan:

- VDEM, DOF, and VDFP shall create and formalize a Wildfire Annex addendum to the COVEOP within the next six months.

Effective Date

This Executive Order shall be effective upon its signing and shall remain in force and effect unless amended or rescinded by further executive order or directive. Given under my hand and under the Seal of the Commonwealth of Virginia, this 21st day of October 2024.



Attest:

Glenn Youngkin
Glenn Youngkin, Governor

Kelly Gee
Kelly Gee, Secretary of the Commonwealth