

COUNTY OF MERCER

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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PARK COMMISSION TO CONDUCT PRESCRIBED BURNS AT MERCER MEADOWS

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP -- The Mercer County Park Commission will perform prescribed burns at Mercer Meadows this winter and spring with the New Jersey Forest Fire Service (NJFFS). The NJFFS worked in collaboration with the Park Commission's Stewardship Department on an initial prescribed burn in 2020. The next phase of the plan is set to begin in the days ahead.

In 2018, Gov. Phil Murphy signed The Prescribed Burn Act, which expanded the ability of the NJFFS to implement prescribed fire for habitat management as well as other forestry and ecological needs. This legislation also made the services of the NJFFS more accessible to local governments.

Properly conducted prescribed burns encourage native seed germination, reduce invasive plant pressure, and cycle nutrients into the soil. Increasing habitat quality and diversity along with promoting forest regeneration, managing invasive species, and grassland establishment are all benefits from conducting prescribed burns. The Park Commission anticipates the burns to have additional benefits such as reducing hazardous fuel loads to prevent unplanned, potentially damaging wildfires. Prescribed burns have also been successful in reducing tick and insect pest populations.

Following the prescribed burn at the Pole Farm in 2020, stewardship staff conducted a photo study of the areas that were burned. Photos were taken from fixed points throughout the park after the burn and during the growing season. The progression of photographs taken demonstrated the suppression of woody invasive species, and thriving herbaceous plants in the burned fields. Results from the annual breeding bird survey displayed an increase in overall abundance of birds in the field monitored during the breeding season post-burn compared to previous years. Additional scientific monitoring is planned to evaluate the success of the prescribed burn.

The prescribed burns at the Pole Farm are expected to take place between January and late spring as determined by the Section Forest Fire Warden. There will be two areas receiving a dormant-season burn, to happen prior to April 15. These burns will occur over a one- to two-day period.

Another area within the Pole Farm will undergo a growing-season burn later this spring, prior to June 15. The Section Warden will determine when the conditions fall within a safe range and will notify the Park Commission and appropriate township and emergency response officials with 48 hours' notice before the burn will begin. For the safety of the public, the park will be closed during and immediately after the burns. The closure will be posted at all entrances, crossings and trailheads, as well as on the Park Commission website and social media pages.

“This initiative would not be possible without the NJFFS and their team of skilled professionals,” said Park Commission Executive Director Aaron T. Watson. “Prescribed burning is a new way for the Park Commission to manage for invasive species and promote a habitat with more native plants, improving the ecological functions of Mercer Meadows. We are thrilled to continue this initiative in 2021.”

The fire will be lit, monitored and managed by the Forest Fire Service officials who have undergone rigorous training and are experienced in conducting safe and effective prescribed burns. All appropriate safety measures and precautions will be taken by those performing the burn. While the burn is in progress there will be law enforcement and fire personnel, equipment and vehicles present at the Pole Farm and surrounding areas. Specific conditions must be met in order to burn, including temperature, relative humidity, and wind speed and direction.

For the days following the burn, there may be smoldering dead trees and logs within the burn areas. This activity is normal and need not be reported to the fire department or Park Commission as a fire hazard. Park Commission staff will be on site to monitor post-burn activity.

For more information on the Mercer Meadows prescribed burn, including frequently asked questions, maps and resources, please visit www.mercercountyparks.org.

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Photo Caption: The Park Commission will conduct prescribed burns at Mercer Meadows between January and late spring.