

Big flames, raining embers in New Jersey Pine Barrens fire

April 12 2023, by Wayne Parry



In this photo provided by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, a massive 2,500-acre forest fire burns in Ocean County, N.J., early Wednesday, April 12, 2023, as firefighters battle the blaze. The fire started late Tuesday, April 11, and is burning across some 2,500 acres (about 1,000 hectares). Credit: New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection via AP

The 200-foot wall of flames, the burning embers landing miles away and the carloads of evacuees fleeing to shelter at a high school—it all took place in New Jersey but could happen in almost every part of the country this week due to dry conditions and strong winds that have raised the danger of forest fires.

As firefighters worked Wednesday to contain a fire that tore through 6 square miles (15 square kilometers) of New Jersey's Pine Barrens, the National Weather Service issued so-called "red flag warnings" on Wednesday for 20 states spanning the nation. The agency cautioned that dry, windy conditions similar to those in New Jersey were increasing the danger of forest fires elsewhere, too.

The blaze in Manchester, near Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, forced the evacuation of around 170 homes late Tuesday, with police and fire officials going door-to-door to ask people to take temporary shelter at a nearby high school. Helicopters were filling large containers with water from a nearby lake Wednesday and dropping it on the flames.

No one was injured and no homes were damaged, although firefighters said 20 structures were still considered threatened Wednesday afternoon, by which time the fire had been 60% contained.

"We saw the red glow in the sky, and every time the wind would shift, it got worse," said Jason Cylenica, who lives in the neighborhood closest to the fire. His wife, Cynthia Tiemper, said burning embers were landing in their back yard Tuesday night, making them decide to evacuate even before the fire department knocked on their door at 10:45 p.m.



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"We left so fast I didn't even bring socks," she said. "It was like, 'You grab the dog, I'll grab this and let's go.' When we got back here this morning and saw that everything was still here, it was like prayers had been answered."

Although the state is not in a drought, there's no chance of rain until the weekend in the part of New Jersey where the fire is burning. The state on Wednesday banned campfires and imposed restrictions on charcoal or

gas fires.

April is the peak month for forest fires in New Jersey, officials said. And despite its status as the nation's most densely populated state, 40% of it is forest. There are about 1,500 wildfires a year in New Jersey, according to the state Forest Fire Service.

Forest fires are a common occurrence in the Pine Barrens, a 1.1 million-acre state and federally protected reserve about halfway between Philadelphia to the west and the Atlantic coast to the east. On Wednesday afternoon, the Forest Fire Service was responding to another blaze in West Milford in the northwest portion of the state near Route 23, but estimates of the size of that fire were not immediately available.



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"This fire exhibited extreme fire behavior," John Cecil, an assistant commissioner in the state's Department of Environmental Protection, said of the Pine Barrens blaze. "I don't mean to be dramatic, but this was a severe situation that these guys and gals managed to keep in a place and protect lives and property from that."

About 75 firefighters, two helicopters, bulldozers and 15 fire engines were being used to battle the flames.

Greg McLaughlin, the Forest Fire Service chief, said the blaze began on the grounds of Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, a military facility spanning several municipalities at about 4 p.m. Tuesday. Military personnel tried to extinguish it, but winds soon spread the fire beyond the base's perimeter and across a busy highway, Route 539, necessitating a large response from numerous municipalities in the region.



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A cause of the fire wasn't given, but authorities said they're investigating.

In the parking lot of a firehouse miles away from the fire scene, McLaughlin held up a plastic bag filled with small pieces of charred wood—dead embers that had flown through the air over two miles away and threatened to start new fires.

Last month, a wildfire in the Pine Barrens threatened over a dozen homes in Little Egg Harbor, not far from the site of a massive forest fire in 2007 at an Air National Guard target range. That fire burned nearly 27 square miles (70 square kilometers).

Fire is an essential element of the Pine Barrens ecosystem; many of the pine trees there rely on heat from fires to release seeds from their cones, providing for the growth of new trees.

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