

## Firewise – A Walk in the Park

### Firewise Outreach at Jakes Branch County Park

#### The Challenge

Ocean County, New Jersey, is nestled within the Pine Barrens along the Jersey Shore. Hot and fast-spreading wildfires are common in the Pine Barrens of Ocean County. On average, 353 wildfires burn more than 2,866 acres of forest in the county each year. There is a potential for explosive wildfire because of the combination of hazardous wildland fuels, ever-increasing home development in the wildland-urban interface, and a high frequency of fires caused by humans. In 2002, the Jakes Branch Wildfire burned 1,277 acres in northern Ocean County. This wildfire resulted in the loss of three homes and 15 outbuildings, damage to an additional 18 homes, and over \$1 million in property loss.

#### The Solution

In 2009, the Ocean County Department of Parks and Recreation opened Jakes Branch County Park as a visible reminder of the wildfire's devastation. In 2010, this department received a State Fire Assistance Hazard Mitigation grant from the Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry unit of the U.S. Forest Service. The grant was used to develop a Firewise and fire awareness exhibit at the Jakes Branch Park Nature Center. Located very close to the Garden State Parkway, the exhibit would provide information to county residents as well as visitors from all over the State who stopped in on their way to the Jersey Shore. The exhibit, "Firewise Living in the Garden State," was dedicated in June 2012.

#### Resulting Benefits

The Firewise exhibit depicts a scene from the Jakes Branch Wildfire complete with a floor-to-ceiling mural of the wildfire. The exhibit features a helicopter dropping water



*County Freeholder John Bartlett, Jr., discusses the benefits of wildfire preparedness during the exhibit's dedication ceremony. Photo Credit: Ocean County Department of Parks and Recreation*

and a New Jersey Forest Fire Service off-road engine in action that protrudes from the exhibit. The exhibit stresses the importance of preventing wildfires and discusses measures that all residents of Ocean County's forested areas should follow to be prepared for wildfire. A self-guided walking trail that traverses the fire-scarred area has multiple wayside displays and reinforces the exhibit's concepts and themes.

The New Jersey Forest Fire Service also works with the Ocean County Department of Parks and Recreation to have an active prescribed burning program at the park. This program not only reduces hazardous fuels on park property, but serves as a living demonstration of the benefits of using prescribed fire to manage fire-adapted forests as well as promote public safety to protect people and their property in the wildland-urban interface.

#### Sharing Success

The Jakes Branch County Park has thousands of visitors each year. Ocean County has been impacted by many large wildfires in the past century, and this outreach effort will help educate school children and adults about preventing wildfires and making their communities better able to withstand the impacts of wildfire in the future.

*The "Firewise Living in the Garden State" exhibit educates residents about fire prevention, fire ecology, and fire management principles, and improves community preparedness for future wildfire events and their impacts.*



U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Forest Service  
Northeastern Area  
State and Private Forestry  
www.na.fs.fed.us

November 2012

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