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Smoldering Ground Fire Spreads Across Acres Of Mashpee River Woodlands

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Mashpee firefighters searched for several hours on Tuesday afternoon before locating the source of a hazy smoke that had spread over several miles, a slow-burning ground fire creeping through the Mashpee River Woodlands conservation area.

The fire burned through the pine needles and other debris, up several large trees, and down into the soil across seven acres in the southern end of the woodlands, just north of the Pirates Cove neighborhood, before firefighters fully snuffed it out Wednesday morning.

Firefighters located the blaze mid-evening Tuesday and worked until dark, facing brutally hot temperatures and nagging mosquitoes. They put out the visible flames and doused the perimeter with water and extinguisher foam to help the moisture seep down into the soil.

But the dozen or so firefighters on the scene, including three large brush-breaker trucks, were unable to sufficiently “wet down” the whole area before dark. So after returning occasionally through the night to ensure a breeze had not restarted the fire, they returned at sunrise Wednesday to again douse the still smoldering ground.

Mashpee firefighters, with assistance from the Cotuit, Falmouth, and Massachusetts Military Reservation fire departments and state Department of Conservation and Recreation staff, also cleared vegetation from the perimeter around the fire to remove fuel for the blaze to spread.

Assessments of the size of the burnt area grew from three acres on Tuesday night up to seven or more acres Wednesday morning, due to both the fire continuing to crawl along the leaf litter and firefighters getting a better look at the area in daylight, according to Chief George W. Baker Jr. of the Mashpee Fire Department.

“The fire is down 18 inches in some places. It is like a smoldering cigar,” Chief Baker said on Wednesday morning. “At no time did we have any houses or people in danger.”

Chief Baker said the conditions are so dry out in the woodlands, and this type of ground fire tends to be so stubborn, that the fire will likely continue to flare up until it rains.

Conservation Agent Andrew McManus said such a fire can continue to smolder for days, and a gust of wind can pick it up again and cause it to spread. “It is one of the most difficult fires to put out because you don’t know where the embers are burning because you can’t see them,” Mr. McManus said.

Chief Baker said on Wednesday that the cause of the fire had not yet been discovered, but it was likely a cigarette.

The Mashpee Fire Department had received several calls describing a woody smoke smell in the early evening on Tuesday. The smell was noticeable across a vast area: west on Route 151 by the municipal complex; northwest in the Quashnet Valley area; north up Meetinghouse Road near Mashpee Town Hall; east over to Orchard Road and near the Cotuit border; and down along Great Neck Road South.

The source of the smoke was not visible from fire towers on the military base and in Sandwich, so Chief Baker said he initially thought it was someone burning trash or brush.

There was little wind to indicate the source of the smoke and the high humidity kept it from floating up in the air, so it just slowly drifted around and settled into low-lying areas, much like a low-lying cloud, Chief Baker said.

“Because of the weather, because of the high humidity and the low winds, the smoke wasn’t ventilating. It wasn’t rising up,” Chief Baker said on Wednesday. “It is like fog. Fog is a cloud, a weather layer that keeps the ground air from moving up through the atmosphere. Even today the smoke is not moving that well. It is just clinging right to the area.”

Firefighters picked their way through town in the large brush-breaker trucks and other vehicles for a couple of hours, searching for the fire, Captain Joseph Fellows said at the scene on Tuesday night. “We searched top to bottom in town, every back road, everywhere,” he said. “It was a wild goose chase.”

The river woodlands was one of their last stops, Captain Fellows said.

When they discovered the fire, it was still largely confined to the ground, firefighters said, though flames had licked five or six feet up several trees. The eastern edge of the fire was about 100 yards from the small parking lot for the woodlands along Mashpee Neck Road.

The low winds made the fire difficult to spot, but they also kept it from spreading quickly or growing into the crown of the trees, Chief Baker said.

Chief Baker estimated the fire had been burning for a few hours before it was located.

Once they found it, firefighters faced challenging conditions: dense woods that include oak trees nearing 100 feet tall, temperatures in the mid-80s, with high humidity well into dusk. The pine needles and loose, almost mossy soil proved to provide little traction for the brush-breakers, two of which became stuck during the response.

One firefighter, from the military reservation, was injured during the response, Chief Baker said. He was cut while using a chainsaw to clear the area, an injury that allowed him to still walk out of the woods under his own power but required a trip to the hospital, the chief said.

There were no acute problems with heat exhaustion or dehydration; the American Red Cross Disaster Service team was called in Tuesday night to provide fluids and support services. "Hydration was the health word of the day," Chief Baker said.

The scene in the woods Tuesday night was a striking interplay of machinery and nature. Trees crashed as the brush-breakers plowed around. Truck and chainsaw engines roared, radios warbled in the background as the firefighters talked through their response. In quieter moments, their footsteps crunched through low brush and sticks. Smoke seeped around, puffing out of tree trunks and the ground itself. A few hundred yards away was the Mashpee River.

Conservation Agent McManus said pitch pine forests like the Mashpee River Woodlands and many other areas in town are "fire-dependent ecosystems." The pine trees need intense heat to release the seeds in their pine cones, so only after a fire will new trees grow, he said. "That's why when pitch pines die off, you won't see a lot of regeneration of pitch pines, you'll see other types of tree, unless you have a fire," he said.

That dependency on fires is also a reason why the pitch pine ecosystem has become increasingly rare on Cape Cod and the Northeast, he said. As humans try to avoid forest fires, they keep the forest from regenerating.

Chief Baker said smaller ground fires, covering two or three acres, are an annual event on the Upper Cape. "It is not uncommon during April and May to have it that size. But a fire of this size is different," he said. "I don't remember a fire like this since the early '80s. There was one off Payamps road in early '80s, before I came on the force. I remember it took two or three days to put out."

Mr. McManus said the fire is proof that the town needs to manage its conservation lands with an eye on wildfires, a practice the town began in full force last year, and needs to have a wildfire response plan in place.

Two years ago there was a similar, smaller fire, covering an area of less than an acre, about a half mile up Mashpee Neck Road.

Chief Baker said wildfires can create challenges to access, but they tend to be started by people, and so tend to be focused near trails or roads. This fire, for example, was immediately adjacent to a major walking trail in the woodlands.

"There is some human element involved with these fires. Here we are not seeing campfires or intentional, heavily burnt areas. So it is highly likely that it was started with improperly discarded smoking material," Chief Baker said.

Mr. McManus said the foam used by the fire department is not an environmental concern in upland areas. Down closer to surface water, like the Mashpee River, the high phosphorous content in the soapy foam would be a concern for nutrient pollution. But when it is applied up in the woods, the phosphorous will mostly be removed before it reaches surface water, he said.

Chief Baker said the substance is known as a "class A fire extinguisher foam." "It lubricates the water, allowing it to better penetrate the soil. So like a soap bubble, it stays wet longer. It is very similar to soap," he said.

He said years ago firefighters used Lestoil, but the modern foam has less impact on the environment.