

FIRE and CAMP PIRTLE

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I'm fascinated by fire in the forest! My caveman genes must be strong! When I was a new Scout I learned that the second thing that you did when you got to a campsite was build a fire; the first was dig a latrine. If it was real cold, fire came first, then sanitation.

I spent my college freshman summer on a US Forest Service fire crew in the mountains of southern California. My biggest regret from that experience was that we didn't fight any big fires, just a few small ones at campgrounds. Two summers later I worked with a private forestry company in East Texas and got lots of opportunities to light controlled fires and fight small fires that broke away from them. Controlled fires are those that are lit in the forest to accomplish a purpose and simulate a natural ecological process.

Throughout my 27 years of working in East Texas' forests, fire use and control were my most memorable and exciting experiences. With good fires as well as bad ones to teach me I learned to respect forest fire as not only a force to be controlled but also one that was an important factor in natural ecosystems.

During the fall and winter months of 2005 and continuing into 2006, drought became more entrenched in Texas and its neighboring states. Wildfires, most notably grass and brush fires in North and Central Texas and in Oklahoma, have occurred with increasing frequency and unusually deadly intensity. Human lives and property, even small towns, have been destroyed by fierce fires running ahead of dry, gusty winds. The Texas Forest Service report of January 5, 2006 showed that 204,170 acres and 73 structures had burned this year. Newspaper, television, and radio reports all remind citizens not to burn out of doors. The governor of Texas has declared most counties in the state disaster areas. Over the Christmas, New Year, and holiday season, he even asked people to refrain from that almost sacred practice of celebrating with fireworks. The situation in Texas is extremely critical!

What does all of this have to do with Camp Pirtle? Of the total area burned in Texas, only about 1,800 acres have been in East Texas and the worst is yet to come. During the spring and summer of 2005 East Texas received adequate rainfall. The abundance of water resulted in lush growth of grass, shrubs, and trees. The rains ended somewhat abruptly this year and the forest has become severely dry. The weather in February and March is notorious for gusty, dry winds. Combined with an abundance of fuel (dried grasses, etc.) the stage is set for serious wildfires. Until soaking rains come to East Texas and plants begin to green up, the wildfire potential at Camp Pirtle will be severe.

One of the first things that a Scout is taught is how to be safe with outdoor fires – how to prepare for them, how to light them, how to use them, and how to completely extinguish them. Now we need to teach Scouts, Scouters, and other camp guests that the first thing that they must do is determine when it is safe to use open fires and when it isn't.

Until this drought is over all campers should refrain from using any type of open fires, wood or charcoal, including warming or ceremonial fires. Many counties, including Panola County where Camp Pirtle is located, have instituted burn bans, making all outdoor fires illegal. Violators may be fined and the council could also be fined for outdoor fires that occur at GWP. When you're camping, you should consider limiting cooking fires to the very careful use of liquid or bottled fuel stoves.

This crisis will pass. In the meantime please help us protect the people, forests, and facilities at George W. Pirtle Scout Reservation from the destructive power of wildfire! I'm still fascinated by fire in the forest and I appreciate its ecological value in an ecosystem but long ago I learned to "know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em." I'm folding 'em until it rains!