

# NEWS

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County  
Firewardens

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Contact: Lisa Osborn, Fire Prevention Specialist, 406-657-6200, ext. 224

## Interagency Group Coordinates Fire Restrictions in Billings Area

The hot days of summer have arrived, bringing with them another fire season. While we can't do much to prevent fires from natural causes such as lightning strikes, everyone can take steps to reduce the chance of human-caused fires.

The Billings Area Restrictions Group was formed after the 2000 fire season to coordinate fire restrictions and closures on state, federal and private land in a seven-county area surrounding Billings. It has representatives from the Custer National Forest, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and the counties of Big Horn, Carbon, Musselshell, Stillwater, Sweet Grass, Treasure and Yellowstone. The group works to ensure that any fire restrictions placed in the area are not only warranted, but that they are also consistent and easy to understand.

During fire season, the group convenes regularly by phone to discuss current conditions. Carefully considering factors such as weather conditions, fuel moisture, availability of fire suppression resources, and economic impacts, the group determines whether or not restrictions are warranted and then issues one joint message to the public. Fire coordination groups like this one are some of the best examples of cooperation among federal, state and local agencies.

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Considering that open flames, smoking, and internal combustion engines are the sources of most human-caused fires, there are some common guidelines for determining when to initiate restrictions and closures, and what activities will be affected.

Stage 1 restrictions prohibit fires or campfires except within a designated recreation site or improved site. They also prohibit smoking, except within an enclosed vehicle or building, a developed recreation site or while stopped in an area at least three feet in diameter that is barren or cleared of all flammable materials.

Stage 2 restrictions prohibit all campfires, and smoking is prohibited as detailed in Stage 1 restrictions. They also stipulate that motorized vehicles may not be operated off designated roads and trails, and that equipment with internal combustion engines, such as chain saws, may not be used between 1 p.m. and 1 a.m.

Exemptions to both Stage 1 and Stage 2 restrictions are allowed for the harvest of crops. Other exceptions are for federal, state, or local officers, or members of an organized law enforcement, rescue, or firefighting force in the performance of an official duty, or persons with a permit or written authorization allowing the otherwise prohibited act.

In the most extreme conditions, the agencies and county officials may also opt to close certain areas except to residents going to and from their homes. People traveling on paved and numbered highways or occupying designated improved campgrounds adjacent to such highways, or organized rescue or firefighting forces in the performance of official duty, are also exempted.

Restrictions and closures can be inconvenient to the public, but are necessary to ensure public and firefighter safety. Anyone who causes a wildland fire -- either willfully or through negligence -- may be held accountable for damage and suppression costs.

Although fire management resources are more abundant this year than ever before, the demand for them is high. Given the dry conditions and hot weather, more large wildfires will occur this season. To help ease demands on fire personnel and equipment, protect public safety, and preserve natural resources and property, please honor fire restrictions and closures. For more information, contact Lisa Osborn, Fire Prevention Specialist, at (406) 657-6200, ext. 224.

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