



## MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF MARINE RESOURCES

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# News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### ***DMR Provides Information on Deer Island Wildfire***

BILOXI, Miss. – Coastal Mississippi is currently under extreme drought conditions. After two recent wildfires on Deer Island, the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources (DMR) is reminding the public that Harrison and Jackson counties along the coast have a burn ban in effect that prohibits any outdoor burning, including campfires. Although there is no proof either of these fires was caused by people, both fires started in areas frequented by boaters and campers. Violation of a burn ban can result in fines up to \$500 (MS Code Section 49-19-351). In addition, a person(s) who recklessly causes a woods fire can face up to 90 days in jail. If the person(s) is found to have acted willfully and maliciously, they face up to 2 years in the state penitentiary (MS Code Section 97-17-13).

DMR along with the Army Corps of Engineers, Mississippi State University and others have been working over the past few months to restore land and vegetation to the island. This week, volunteers helped in this effort by replanting part of west Deer Island with sea oats and other coastal plants to help stabilize the sand recently dredged from the Mississippi Sound.

“These wildfires can easily destroy months of restoration work by killing young trees and shrubs that help hold the island together,” said Jeff Clark, DMR’s Coastal Preserves Manager. “Even after the burn ban is lifted, we ask the public to restrict campfires to near the high tide line and make sure the fires are completely extinguished before leaving.”

Periodic wildfires have always been a part of our natural ecosystems. Contrary to popular belief, wildfires are not inherently negative events. Fires release nutrients back into the soil and promote the growth and flowering of many plant species. This plant rejuvenation, in turn, attracts many birds, mammals and other animal species to the recently burned areas. However, wildfires occurring in the wrong place and at the wrong time can be very destructive, e.g., loss of human life, man-made structures, crops, timber resources, nesting birds and restoration plantings.

Unless a wildfire is threatening human life or other important resources, there is no reason to put firefighters at risk to extinguish the fire. It can just be allowed to burn itself out. The current wildfire on Deer Island falls into this category. This wildfire east of Grand Bayou may continue to burn for two or three more days.

Deer Island is one of the state’s twenty Coastal Preserves, which include the islands and large mainland marsh areas of coastal Mississippi. Most of the island was purchased in 2002 with both state funds and federal funds from the Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program. More than 90% of the 400-acre island is owned by the state and is open to the public for recreation.

#### **10 Important Things to Know When Planning a Trip to Deer Island**

1. Camping is permitted on Deer Island. For safety reasons, it always a good idea to leave a float plan with a local marina, relative or friend.
2. Campfires are not permitted when burn bans are in effect. Campfire rules are as follows:
  - a. Do not cut down any dead or live trees or shrubs for a campfire. Use only deadwood that can be picked up off the beach. Do not collect wood from the interior of the island. If you bring your own wood, make sure that it’s free of nails and staples or anything else that could be hazardous. DMR staff has found the remains of old fires with hundreds of rusty nails—not good for people running around barefooted.

- b. Build your campfire only on the beach, near the high tide line and away from any vegetation. The deadwood and dry brush can ignite easily and cause a wildfire.
  - c. Make sure that you thoroughly extinguish the fire and bury the remains under at least 6 inches of sand to prevent an escape or someone accidentally stepping on hot coals.
3. Please take garbage bags to clean up around your campsite. Don't leave the bags or deposit them in any barrels you may see on the island. People sometimes take trash barrels out to the island, but we have no means of emptying these barrels or collecting scattered garbage from the island so please leave your campsite as clean as you found it. Most of the harbors have a dumpster for depositing trash.
4. The goal for managing the state-owned portion of the island is to keep it as natural as possible. So avoid doing anything that would result in a permanent or long-term impact.
5. Please respect private property. There is still private property on the island and it's not clearly marked. General boundary of the private land: starts near the last set of old pier pilings on the north side of the island and runs several hundred feet west to near where the trees end.
6. Katrina dumped a lot of debris on and around the island. Much of that debris has been cleaned up, but there may still be some potentially hazardous debris (rusty metal, broken glass, etc) hidden under the sand, water or vegetation. So be careful and cautious.
7. The newly dredged material that's been pumped onto the island can be very soft in places, particularly near the water's edge so be careful when stepping out of the boat or you may find yourself stuck in mud up to your waist.
8. There are a lot of dead trees on the island, which may fall over at any time. So pick your camping spot with this in mind. And be mindful of this fact when walking around on the island.
9. Biting bugs can be bad at times so take some bug spray.
10. Make sure you have plenty of water, sunscreen and a first aid kit.

The main objective of the Coastal Preserves Program is to acquire, protect and manage sensitive coastal wetland habitats along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, therefore ensuring the ecological health of Mississippi's coastal wetland ecosystems. The State of Mississippi currently has title to about 36,000 acres of the designated 72,000 acres of crucial coastal wetland habitat within Mississippi's 20 coastal preserve sites.

For more information on the Mississippi Coastal Preserves system, contact the DMR at (228) 374-5000 or visit [dmr.ms.gov](http://dmr.ms.gov).

The Mississippi Department of Marine Resources is dedicated to enhancing, protecting and conserving marine interests of the state by managing all marine life, public trust wetlands, adjacent uplands and waterfront areas to provide for the optimal commercial, recreational, educational and economic uses of these resources consistent with environmental concerns and social changes.

**PHOTO CREDIT: PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF MARINE RESOURCES**

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**PHOTO CAPTION A: DMR continues to monitor a wildfire burning on Deer Island. Periodic wildfires have always been a part of our natural ecosystems. Fires release nutrients back into the soil and promote the growth and flowering of many plant species. This wildfire east of Grand Bayou may continue to burn for two to three more days.**



**PHOTO CAPTION B: Representatives from the Gulf Coast Heritage Trails Partnership, DMR's Coastal Preserves Program and the U.S. National Park Service stand at the mouth of Grand Bayou. The group took a kayak excursion to Deer Island last July to explore creating a Deer Island Blueway that would highlight the ecological, cultural and historical resources of the island.**

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