DEM POISED TO CONDUCT PRESCRIBED BURNS ON STATE LANDS IN EXETER & COVENTRY & ON PRUDENCE ISLAND IN UPCOMING WEEKS

PROVIDENCE, RI – The Department of Environmental Management (DEM) is announcing that depending on weather and wind conditions, it plans on conducting low-severity prescribed burns on state lands in Exeter and Coventry and on Prudence Island starting sometime in the last two weeks of March or the first week of April, excluding weekends. DEM will advise the public again several days before it has identified a more reliable “burn window” in which to conduct a prescribed fire operation. The agency will further notify Rhode Islanders by timely social media posts and distributing flyers to abutting landowners and neighbors.

A burn window refers to when the environmental variables such as fuel moisture and weather conditions are balanced so that the fire will accomplish its goals, which include reducing fuels (i.e., combustible materials on forest floors and in grasslands), modifying wildlife habitat, and restoring ecological function while remaining under control. One of the biggest factors in determining a burn window is forecasting the weather. Whereas a 10-day forecast is accurate about only half the time, a five-day forecast can accurately predict the weather around 90% of the time, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Wind is an equally critical factor. DEM’s “go/no-go” decision on which of the burns to conduct will likely come down to wind speed and direction, to allow for the optimal dispersal of smoke. At this point in their preparations for a busy burn season, however, DEM burn managers are targeting parcels at Pratt Farm in

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the Arcadia Management Area, located on the Exeter-Richmond line, as the location of the first prescribed burn in 2023.

“Pratt Farm and the surrounding forestland is a fire-adapted ecosystem that depends on the use of prescribed fire to maintain healthy vegetation and wildlife habitats,” said Forest Fire Program Manager Pat MacMeekin. “The project at Pratt Farm will be the start of our prescribed fire season this spring. We plan to conduct burning here and at other DEM properties across the state throughout the spring and fall.”

MacMeekin described the Pratt Farm fire – which will target one or more parcels at the DEM-run management area – as “a grassland burn, with the goal of removing the grass thatch layer, to open and release the seedbank and promote native, warm season grasses such as little bluestem and big bluestem.”

Currently, the grasslands at the site are recently converted hayfields whose grasses are mostly nonnative and cool season species. Also, pitch pine saplings are scattered throughout the field site. Pitch pine refers to the high resin content of this important native tree’s knotty wood. It thrives on dry rocky soil that other trees cannot tolerate. “The application of consistent, prescribed fire will help to restore the fields to native grasses and pitch pine barrens. Pitch pine barrens are especially important habitats for moths, leafhoppers, pollinators, box turtles, Northern black racers, and whip-poor-wills, Eastern towhees, and several songbirds,” MacMeekin said.

Last month DEM announced it was planning more prescribed fires in 2023 for the reasons stated above and to reduce the risk of unplanned, high-severity, destructive wildfires. In 2022, which was marked by a severe drought that the state only now is recovering from, Rhode Island experienced more than 80 wildland fires. Parched conditions forced DEM to ban outdoor fires at all state campgrounds, parks, and management areas for a two-week period in August.

By increasing its use of prescribed fire, Rhode Island will be better aligning its land management policies and practices with neighboring states. From 2018 to 2022, Massachusetts ignited 223 prescribed fires totaling 7,148 acres and Connecticut had 18 prescribed fires totaling 300 acres. In the same five-year period, Rhode Island conducted three prescribed fires totaling around 75 acres. Among other benefits, common ecological restoration goals with other states help to strengthen climate change resilience across southern New England.

Experts from DEM’s Forest Fire Program, a subsidiary of the Division of Agriculture and Forest Environment, will lead the prescribed burns. They will employ detailed operational and safety plans. Planning is critical for
every burn. A prescribed burn plan developed by a qualified burn boss must be in place before a burn is conducted. Firebreaks and other site preparations are made. Fire behavior, fuels, and weather are monitored throughout the burn, and if the prescription parameters are exceeded, the fire is shut down. The burn is carried out by a skilled crew under the direction of a qualified burn boss. DEM burn managers have obtained the required local permits and an exemption from state air pollution control regulation Part 4: Open Fires (250-RICR-120-05-4). Managers also have communicated with the Exeter No. 2 Fire Chief, Hope Valley-Wyoming Fire Chief, Rhode Island Southern Firefighters League, US Fish and Wildlife Service, the DEM Division of Fish & Wildlife, and the DEM Office of Air Resources.

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