

# State-Local Dispute Smolders After Marsh Fire

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**Mukwonago, Wis.** — Can the state conservation department prevent a fire department from fighting a fire on state land?

"That's our orders, to not go out on conservation and public hunting grounds unless private property is involved or threatened," said Henry Buchholz, chief of the Mukwonago fire department.

"As far as telling any fire department not to go out and put out any fire, I don't have such authority," said Allen McVey, district game manager for Milwaukee and Waukesha counties.

Landowners near the Vernon marsh near here complained that their property was threatened by a fire that burned for nearly 10 hours on Nov. 14. When it started about 2 p.m., they said, the Mukwonago fire department went to the scene, but was not allowed to go into the marsh to put out the blaze.

## Burned Out of Control

It later flamed out of control, crossed a creek and swept toward buildings at the north end of the marsh. It eventually required units from three departments plus the use of bulldozers to halt the fire about midnight.

"It seems to me if McVey hadn't been out there, they

(firemen) would have put it out," said Byron Hardaker, town of Mukwonago chairman. He said his son-in-law, Bernie Bettinger, a fireman who had been hunting in the area, told him that McVey would not let the fire department stop the fire because the state did not have the money to pay for the service.

McVey said later:

"We have only the role of landowners. The responsibility for fires as far as any contracts are concerned is made by town officials. . . .

## "Rather Ineffective"

"The problem resolves itself into how effective a fire department is in a marsh fire. The fire departments are rather ineffective."

He said he had advised the town of Vernon that probable damage from a marsh fire usually did not warrant the use of trucks out in the marsh.

He said he was misunderstood. He said he was not refusing to let fire departments go out on state land.

McVey said the Mukwonago fire department was not summoned by him because "the fire damage was in a place they couldn't get to."

Robert Smith of the state conservation department's game management division said: "Sometimes when a fire starts in our area where we don't need a fire department, someone will call the fire depart-

ment and they will go out there. And we get a bill for \$100. If we thought we needed additional help we certainly would ask for it."

## Critical of Efforts

Residents of the area mobilized to fight the fire, but McVey was critical of their efforts. "Everybody got somewhat panicky. People moved in there that were not much help."

Charles Dewey, assistant fire chief, said he, Buchholz, McVey and about five other firemen were together at the fire about 5:30 p.m. "He said to let it go, no need of going out there," Dewey said.

McVey said he did meet with a group of firemen that day. "I imagine they were connected with the fire department," he said. "But I didn't talk to any officials from any of them (the departments)."

It was 5:30 p.m. when additional help was summoned. Mukwonago sent three fire fighting units, the town of Waukesha two and the city of Waukesha sent a truck.

McVey said the fire got to within 100 feet of the buildings, some of which are owned by the state. The others are owned by Mrs. Minnie Yerke and Leon Kargula.

The fire was eventually kept from the buildings by using bulldozers and other earth mov-

ing equipment owned by residents of the area to pile up mounds of dirt, and the fire fighting equipment.

## Burned 423 Acres

McVey said it burned 423 acres and he would submit a fire damage loss report of \$423 —an arbitrary \$1 an acre he said was generally used for such fires. Early reports put the acreage total at 1,200.

"In walking through the fire area the next day, there were field mice running all over," he said, explaining that the fire was not serious. "The only peat fire was in the ditch banks. There was no evidence of any game entrapped."

Dewey questioned the estimation. "How bad is bad? Three hundred people lost a Saturday afternoon."