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Melissa Velez-Morales

From: Masser, Michelle
Sent: Wednesday, March 23, 2016 2:03 PM
To: Harris, Laura
Cc: Gouveia, Susan; Melissa Velez-Morales
Subject: FW: NJDEP Press Release - Wharton Stte Forest Protection Plan
Attachments: Wharton Enforcement Effort -- P14.pdf

CORRESPONDENCE

Michelle Masser
Township Clerk
Mount Olive Township
PO Box 450
204 Flanders Drakestown Road
Budd Lake, NJ 07828
clerk@mtolivetwp.org
973-691-0900 X7291

From: Rogers, Joseph [mailto:Joseph.Rogers@dep.nj.gov] **On Behalf Of** Randazzo, Cindy
Sent: Wednesday, March 23, 2016 10:50 AM
To: Randazzo, Cindy <Cindy.Randazzo@dep.nj.gov>
Subject: NJDEP Press Release - Wharton Stte Forest Protection Plan

Dear Municipal Clerk:

Please see the attached NJDEP Press Release concerning the Wharton State Park Protection Plan.

If you have any questions, please contact me directly.

Sincerely,

Cindy W. Randazzo
Director
Office of Local Government Assistance
New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection
401 E. State Street
P.O. Box 402
Trenton, NJ 08625-0402
Office: 609-633-7700
Cell – 609-575-3806
email: cindy.randazzo@dep.nj.gov

www.nj.gov/dep/

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DEP NEWS RELEASE

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

Chris Christie, Governor
Kim Guadagno, Lt. Governor
Bob Martin, Commissioner



IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 23, 2016

Contact: Lawrence Hajna (609) 984-1795

Bob Considine (609) 292-2994

Caryn Shinske (609) 984-1795

DEP ANNOUNCES PLAN TO PROTECT WHARTON STATE FOREST WHILE MAINTAINING AMPLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL USER GROUPS *ENHANCED ENFORCEMENT, IMPROVED SIGNAGE, ROAD REPAIRS ARE KEYS TO BETTER BALANCE MULTIPLE USES IN LARGEST TRACT IN STATE PARK SYSTEM*

(16/P14) TRENTON – Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Bob Martin today announced an enhanced effort to better balance ecological protection with multiple public uses of Wharton State Forest, an ecological and recreational treasure in the heart of the Pinelands.

The effort will include increased law enforcement to prevent illegal off-road motorized vehicle use which damages environmentally sensitive areas, improved signage to alert visitors to



Wharton's most environmentally sensitive areas, and continued repairs to the forest's vast network of sand and dirt roads to improve accessibility and protect resources.

“Wharton State Forest has a long tradition of offering a wide diversity of recreational opportunities to people with varied interests,” Commissioner Martin said. “Our goal is to allow all users to continue to enjoy Wharton while better protecting the unique ecological resources and beauty of this special place that we all treasure.”

The DEP held a meeting Tuesday night at Batsto Village, located within the 125,000-acre State Forest, to explain the effort to representatives of stakeholder groups including mayors, local emergency responders, environmental groups, motorized recreational users, kayakers, and hunting and fishing groups. These groups participated in an extensive public outreach and stakeholder effort the DEP conducted last fall.

“During this stakeholder process and at a well-attended public meeting in Hammonton, the

common theme we heard from all who enjoy this magnificent piece of the Pinelands is that more enforcement is needed to ensure that those who use motorized vehicles in the state forest do so legally and without damaging ecological resources,” Commissioner Martin said.

The enhanced enforcement effort, which will include stepped-up patrols by State Park Police and Conservation Officers, will focus on preventing illegal off-roading, and will protect a number of environmentally sensitive areas, including wetlands, cultural resources, unique geological features and vernal ponds.

Wharton State Forest, by far the largest tract of the New Jersey State Park Service, has long offered a wide diversity of recreational opportunities. Our goal is to allow all users to continue to enjoy Wharton while protecting the unique ecological resources and beauty of this special place that we all treasure.

Commissioner Bob Martin

In addition to increased patrols, the state forest’s entry roads, including main roads and sand roads, will be posted with dozens of signs reminding visitors that the area is being patrolled and that state motor vehicle rules apply when using the forest’s vast network of unimproved roads. In addition, a number of environmentally sensitive areas that have sustained significant and repeated damage will be marked with signs restricting motorized use.

The Park Service will also continue to work to repair and improve roads that have become deeply rutted by misuse of off-road vehicles, causing vehicles to get stuck and creating significant access problems for first

responders, including New Jersey Forest Fire Service personnel. Drivers often are forced to go around these areas to avoid getting stuck, in the process damaging plant life and wildlife as they cut new paths known as go-arounds.

“As we have done this past year, we will continue to make investments in road repair where it is most critical in Wharton State Forest,” said Assistant Commissioner of Natural and Historic Resources Rich Boornazian. “We are in the process of finalizing a comprehensive road repair plan to address those areas that are most in need to ensure the safety of our visitors.”

“We want to ensure that all users of the forest will have ample opportunities to continue accessing your favorite parts of Wharton and enjoying your favorite recreational activities,” said Division of Parks and Forestry Director Mark Texel. “However, it is very important that anyone who uses a vehicle within Wharton State Forest abide by applicable motor vehicle laws and laws that protect natural resources and park resources from damage.”

Commissioner Martin stressed that the DEP is working cooperatively with state, county and local law enforcement to ensure clear and consistent enforcement of statutes that prohibit the destruction of environmentally sensitive areas and require proper registration and enforcement of all motor vehicle regulations. Violations can carry a fine starting at \$250, plus costs to restore damaged natural resources. Vehicles may also be impounded, which could increase overall costs to more than \$900.

At 125,000 acres and sprawling over much of Burlington County and parts of Camden and Atlantic counties, Wharton State Forest provides habitat for numerous rare plants and animals,

some unique to the Garden State.

Wharton provides habitat to some 300 bird species, nearly 60 reptile and amphibian species, and more than 90 fish species. New Jersey lists 43 animals as threatened or endangered, including the Pine Barrens tree frog, timber rattlesnake, and pine snake.

Wharton State Forest also boasts some 850 species of plants, including wild orchids, sedges, grasses and insect-eating plants. Rare plants include the bog asphodel, swamp pink and Pine Barrens gentian. The predominant trees are the pitch pine, various oak species, and Atlantic white cedar.

The extensive network of unimproved roads in Wharton State Forest was built primarily in the 18th and 19th centuries to connect villages which supported a variety of industries, including iron-making, glassmaking, timber and agriculture.

For more information on Wharton State Forest, as well as summaries of stakeholder sessions and the Hammonton public meeting, visit

<http://www.state.nj.us/dep/parksandforests/parks/wharton.html>.

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