

New Year Brings Changes in **Law Enforcement**

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On January 1, 2015, when most were ringing in the New Year, the Alabama Forestry Commission was quietly changed in a fundamental way. For the first time in its long history as an independent agency, dating back to 1969, the Commission was no longer a law enforcement entity.

Consolidation. That was a major focus of the 2013 Regular Session of the Alabama Legislature. Touted as a way to reduce costs and improve efficiency in government, the Legislature passed Alabama Act 2013-67, which was soon signed into law by Governor Robert Bentley. This measure effectively merged the law enforcement functions of 12 separate state agencies — including the Alabama Forestry Commission — into the newly-formed Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (“ALEA”). This merger was fully implemented on January 1, 2015.

In the past, the Alabama Forestry Commission had literally dozens of sworn law enforcement officers. All across the state, the vast majority of the Forestry Commission’s foresters and rangers carried a badge and a gun. While they fought wildland fires and helped manage timber assets for forest landowners, they also responded to and investigated situations involving wildland arson and other unlawful burning, as well as cases of timber and logging equipment theft. For Alabamians, the Forestry Commission served as the single agency for forestry-related matters.

In 2007 and 2008, state budget cuts and the resulting restructuring of the Forestry Commission brought about a smaller, dedicated unit of forest investigators. By 2014, the Forestry Commission had seven full-time forest investigators and two arson-trained bloodhounds, Blaze and Ember. On January 1, 2015, however, all of this was lost to the newly formed ALEA.

When it comes to law enforcement needs, things are now quite different for Alabama’s forest landowners. For a long time, a single phone call to the local county forester or the Commission’s dispatch center could initiate a response to an ongoing fire, a report of arson or other illegal burning, or a report of timber theft. All of these functions were handled by the Forestry Commission in-house, and landowners had little reason to go elsewhere for fire or law enforcement assistance.

Ironically, state agency consolidation will now require landowners to call three different agencies to obtain the services previously offered solely by the Alabama Forestry Commission. These services are now broken into three areas: (1) wildland fire suppression, (2) wildland arson investigation, and (3) other for-

estry-related crimes. Respectively, these areas will be served by the Forestry Commission, the State Fire Marshal, and ALEA.

One thing that has not changed is the Forestry Commission’s primary responsibility to protect Alabama’s forests, which includes the suppression of wildland fires. To report an ongoing forest fire, call 911 or 1-800-392-5679.



All wildland arson and other unlawful burning investigations will now be handled by the State Fire Marshal Office. Its arson tip line is 1-800-654-0775, and the State Fire Marshal’s main number is (334) 241-4166. Of note, the Forestry Commission’s own arson tip line (1-800-222-2927) has been routed to the State Fire Marshal, but this number will be discontinued in mid-2015.

Timber thefts, logging equipment thefts, and similar forestry-related crimes will now be investigated by the Alabama Agricultural & Rural Crime Unit (ARCU), which is a unit within ALEA that includes many of the Forestry Commission’s former forest investigators. ARCU’s number is 1-855-75CRIME. Reports can also be made through ARCU’s website at <http://arcu.alabama.gov/>.

As always, even though the Alabama Forestry Commission is no longer a law enforcement agency, it nonetheless stands ready to continue serving the state’s forest landowners in any way that it can. If you have questions concerning these important changes, feel free to contact the Forestry Commission. ☎