

The Smokey Bear Wildfire Prevention campaign is the longest-running public service campaign in U.S. history. Since 1944, the iconic symbol of conservation and protection of America's forests has taught millions about their role in preventing wildfires. With Smokey and the campaign hitting a major milestone in 2019, we look back over his productive career.

SMOKEY BEAR

FROM IDEA TO ICON

Smokey Bear's story begins with World War II. In spring 1942, a few months after Japanese planes had attacked Pearl Harbor, an enemy submarine fired shells that exploded near an oil field close to the Los Padres National Forest. U.S. Forest Service personnel feared that future attacks could ignite forest fires

and cause disastrous loss of life and destruction of property. Although the Forest Service and other federal agencies had been trying to educate people about the dangers of forest fires since Theodore Roosevelt was president, the enemy's success in attacking the U.S. mainland, however limited the damage, gave protection of the nation's lumber supply new importance.

The demands of war limited the number of firefighters, leaving communities to deal with wildfires as best they could. Prevention became crucial. To help, the U.S. Forest Service organized the Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention (CFFP) program with the National Association of State Foresters and the War Advertising Council (which became the Advertising Council after the war ended). The program's purpose: to inform the public about how forest fires could undermine the war effort.

The CFFP strategy included distributing posters and postcards with frank imagery and blunt slogans, such as "Forest Fires Aid the Enemy" and "Our Carelessness, Their Secret Weapon," that were clearly aimed at adults. It wanted to reach a younger audience as well, however. In 1943, the program secured permission to use Disney's newest animated character to get the message out. In the climactic scene of the film *Bambi*, an unattended campfire spreads to the woods and forces the titular buck and his friends and family to flee ahead of the raging forest fire. Though the film had not done well at the box office upon release in 1942, nonetheless the CFFP must have concluded that a cartoon character people

knew by name would resonate with audiences of all ages.

With *Bambi*'s one-year loan period coming to an end in 1944, the CFFP set about creating its own fire prevention mascot. It obviously could not use a deer again. One poster issued during this time showed three nondescript bears gathered around a tree with a fire prevention sign tacked to it; another had alarmed squirrels in the style of *Bambi*'s artwork reacting to a fire not visible to the viewer. After some debate, campaign's developers settled on a bear. Bears, it was decided, were familiar to people no matter where they lived because of their presence in zoos and circuses, the many children's stories about them, and the popularity of stuffed bear toys. Furthermore, a bear could stand erect like a human and look capable of fighting a fire using a shovel or bucket. Lastly, a bear would command respect because of its size and intimidating physical presence. As for what to call him, the bear's creators were inspired by a heroic New York City fireman named Joseph "Smokey Joe" Martin.¹

The Forest Service authorized the creation of Smokey Bear on August 9, 1944, a date now celebrated as Smokey's "birthday." Artist Albert Staehle delivered his final rendition of Smokey Bear on October 10 of that year, complete with his trademark campaign hat and jeans. Three years later, Smokey's slogan—"Remember ...only YOU can prevent forest fires"—made its debut. It proved so effective that in later years, just the image of Smokey's face with the words "Remember" or "Only you" conveyed the message.

BY JAMES G. LEWIS



The use of squirrels in this c. 1944–45 poster reflected the appeal of using forest animals to convey a fire prevention message.

Stahle is credited with drawing the first Smokey image, which looks more realistic than those that followed. Smokey's fearsome teeth soon disappeared and his claws softened into fingers with which to point. James Hansen made him appear more "adult, rotund, and drawn in caricature." Rudolph "Rudy" Wendelin served as Smokey Bear's official artist from 1946 until his retirement in 1973. He added Smokey's name to his hat and belt buckle and made him look more human.² Wendelin also created the statuette used for the various Smokey awards given for fire prevention service at national, regional, and state levels. In addition, he mentored several other artists who worked on the bear, ensuring that Smokey would have a fairly consistent look.

SMOKEY COMES TO LIFE

In spring 1950, a wildfire broke out in the Capitan Mountains of New Mexico. The first crew to respond discovered a growing wildfire sweeping the ground between the trees, driven by a strong wind. Soon, about 30 firefighters were caught directly in its path, along with a lone bear cub, which took refuge in a tree. The crew survived the blaze by lying face down on a rockslide for more than an hour as the fire burned past them. The cub survived, too, but with badly burned paws and hind legs. The crew brought him back to fire camp. Ray Bell, of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, took him to a veterinarian and then to his home to care for him.

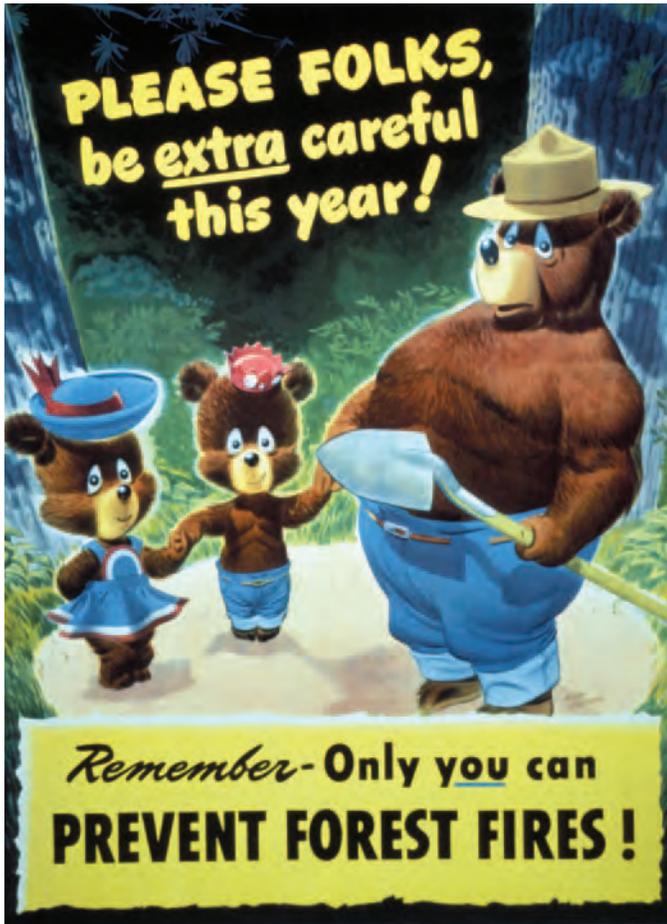


This is the first Smokey poster issued. In Albert Staehle's early drafts of Smokey, the bear did not wear jeans.

News about the little bear spread nationwide in no time, as did photos of the cub with Bell's young daughter, Judy, in front of a Smokey poster. Within a few weeks, state and federal officials had secured a home for the cub at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. As the living symbol of Smokey Bear, the cub received numerous gifts and so many letters he was eventually given his own zip code. Upon his death in 1976, he was buried at the Smokey Bear Historical Park in Capitan, New Mexico, where visitors can pay tribute and learn more about Smokey's origins.

Smokey has come to life in other ways. In the 1950s, he appeared in innumerable children's books and coloring books published to convey his message. Children who wrote to Smokey received a Junior Ranger kit, complete with a badge shaped like the Forest Service shield but with Smokey's face embossed on it. As his popularity continued to grow over the next decade, he got his own television special, an animated Saturday morning cartoon series, and a balloon in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. Costumed versions of Smokey—some of them homemade before standardized ones were developed—have appeared in parades large and small since at least the early 1950s, most recently in the 2019 Tournament of Roses parade.

In 1952, singer Eddy Arnold recorded "Smokey the Bear." The song further bolstered the popularity of Smokey but also created confusion about his official name: songwriters Steve Nelson and Jack Rollins had added "the" only to keep the song's rhythm. The same year the song was recorded, increasing commercial interest



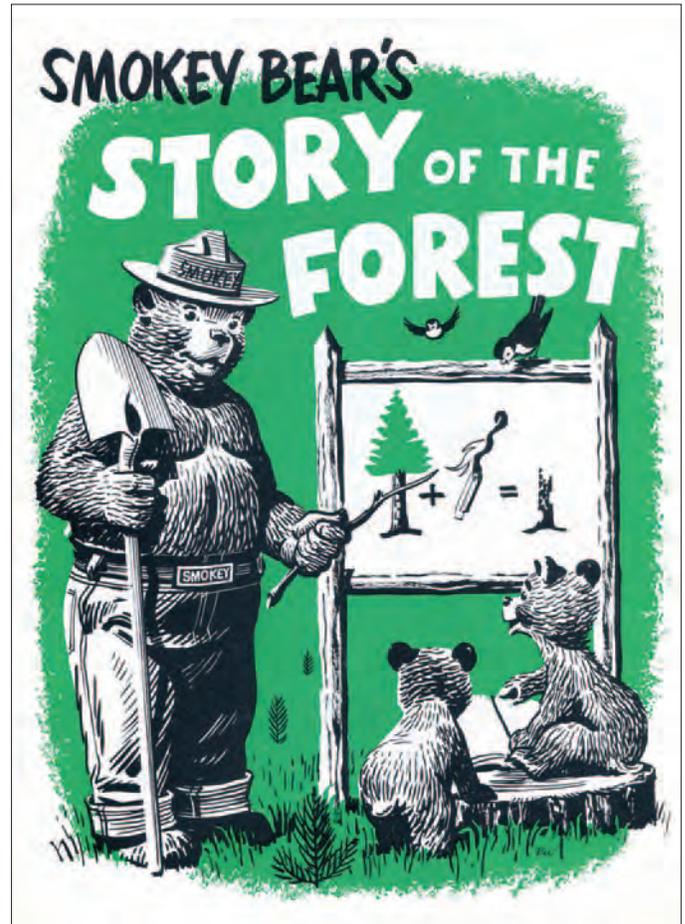
Russ Wetzel, a cartoonist by training, produced this version of Smokey in 1947, which the CFFP determined was not serious enough to match the message.

prompted Congress to remove Smokey's image from the public domain and require a license to create Smokey products. Fees and royalties collected go into an account for fire prevention education. President Dwight Eisenhower, who signed the bill, received one of the first Smokey Bear toys to give to his grandson.

SMOKEY'S ENDURING MESSAGE

Over the decades, Smokey's fire prevention message has reached millions of people. As wildfires grew in size and frequency during the 1980s and 1990s, however, debates arose as to what that message should be. The general public was hearing conflicting messages. Forest researchers and ecologists wanted to create awareness that not all fires were bad, and in fact, some forest ecosystems needed fire to thrive, if not survive. The CFFP wanted people to understand that wildfires posed a danger to other areas, such as grasslands. So after more than half a century of warning about the danger of forest fires, in 2001, Smokey's message was changed to "Only you can prevent wildfires."³

The CFFP has also updated Smokey's personality. Over the decades, he has increasingly shown a softer side, becoming less of a scold and more of a supportive friend. In addition to making parade appearances, Smokey has appeared with popular stars and athletes, in person or in public service announcements (PSAs), often putting his large furry arm around the celebrity's shoulder in a gesture of friendship. Posters in the 1960s and 1970s showed him in the woods with children, relaxing in his ranger cabin, or



Under "Rudy" Wendelin's direction, Smokey assumed his more humanoid form, as seen on the cover of this 1968 coloring book.

surrounded by vulnerable woodland creatures, further hinting that he was a bear everyone could get along with. In 2013, the CFFP released PSAs depicting Smokey giving out hugs to startled human visitors in the forest who had demonstrated they knew how to avoid causing wildfires. Popular phrases have been adapted for use in messaging. In 2010, for example, Smokey encouraged young adults to "Get your Smokey on"—to be more like him and speak up if they saw someone acting carelessly. At about the same time, a CGI version of Smokey made its debut, as did a mobile app to provide critical information about wildfire prevention, including a step-by-step guide to safely building and extinguishing campfires, as well as a map of current wildfires across America.⁴

But because humans still cause nearly ninety percent of wildfires nationwide, Smokey's message enjoining Americans to prevent wildfires remains relevant—and for the most part effective. Recent surveys conducted by the Ad Council reveal that Smokey's image is recognized by eight of ten Americans.⁵ That shows how well the CFFP and Smokey have kept up with a changing culture. The Smokey Bear website offers information about fire science and ecology, fire prevention, educational materials for schoolchildren, and Smokey's history. In addition to radio and television PSAs and educational materials in English and Spanish, the Smokey campaign pursues an integrated communications strategy that incorporates social media to target young adults. Smokey and his Forest Service team post photos and tweets and live-stream events like his birthday parties. The CFFP worked with Snapchat



Smokey has appeared in countless parades to promote his message. To help mark his 75th birthday, he rode with (l-r) U.S. Forest Service Pacific Southwest Regional Forester Randy Moore, NASF President and Missouri State Forester Lisa Allen, Ad Council VP of Campaign Development Amy Gibson-Grant, and U.S. Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen on the “Smokey Wagon” built specifically for the 2019 Tournament of Roses parade. He made his first appearance in that parade in 1959.

in 2017 to develop a Smokey photo custom lens so that users could see themselves as Smokey, with his ears, snout, and hat. In April 2019, an animated Smokey emoji was released, with celebrities Stephen Colbert, Jeff Foxworthy, and Al Roker providing his voice. To capitalize on the attention generated by the 75th anniversary of his creation, the CFFP launched SmokeyBear75th.org to help people find Smokey birthday events near them.

That Smokey is turning 75 is, perhaps, a bittersweet occasion. His popularity is as high as ever, and the attention he will draw over the next year may even increase that, which means more people will hear his message. But as long as humans are the main cause of wildfires, Smokey Bear will continue celebrating birthdays. □

James Lewis is the editor of Forest History Today, and the proud owner of two Smokey Bear t-shirts. He wishes to thank Whitney Forman-Cook, communications director for the National Association of State Foresters, for her assistance with the article.

NOTES

1. Ellen Earnhardt Morrison, *Guardian of the Forest: A History of the Smokey Bear Program* (New York: Vantage Press, 1976), 7–8.
2. “Smokey’s 21, Minus Teeth—Portly but Still Busiest,” *Reno Evening Gazette*, March 25, 1963.
3. The message that grasslands can burn is not new. In the 1950s, the CFFP produced posters with a painting of cowboys watching over their grazing cattle that warned of preventing range fires, with Smokey’s face in the bottom border.
4. Ad Council, “Smokey Bear Returns to Remind Americans... ‘Only You Can Prevent Wildfires,’” June 30, 2010, <http://multivu.prnewswire.com/mnr/adcouncil/44925/>.
5. Monthly median, Ad Council continuous tracking survey conducted online by Ipsos, Public Affairs; January–December 2017 with a sample of U.S. adults 18+ who recreate outdoors (n=7304).