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U.S. Department of the Interior

Bryce Canyon National Park

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## Bryce Canyon National Park Fire Management



### Bryce Canyon Prescribed Fire Enhances Prairie Dog Habitat

In late September, Bryce Canyon National Park completed a unique prescribed fire project. Their goal was not the reduction of fuel to protect structures, as is usually the case, but to enhance habitat for the threatened Utah prairie dog (*Cynomys parvidens*) or UPD.

This seven-acre burn was conducted in known UPD habitat as identified by the park's resource management staff. In fact, a few of the prairie dogs were seen at the site before ignition began. Prior to the burn, vegetation near active prairie dog burrows was wet down to make sure there is available vegetation for the prairie dogs that are preparing for winter hibernation. The prairie dogs all went into their burrows while the fire was burning. The project was conducted with fire staff from both Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks.



The specific goals of this burn were to reduce some of the thicker, encroaching vegetation near the prairie dog's burrows such as sagebrush, rabbitbrush, antelope bitter brush. The removal of this vegetation will allow native grasses and forbs to grow and provide the prairie dogs with a more desirable food source and improved visibility for detecting predators. These factors will hopefully lead to increased numbers in this colony.

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Although not as numerous as other kinds of prairie dogs, Utah prairie dogs numbered 95,000 animals in the 1920s. By the 1960s, populations had crashed due to disease (bubonic plague), drought, poisoning and other reduction methods. By 1972, it was estimated that only 3,300 prairie dogs remained and that the loss of suitable habitat would result in the species' extinction by the year 2000.

In 1973, the UPD was listed as an endangered species on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife List of Threatened and Endangered Species. UPDs were downlisted from endangered to threatened in the 1980s due to an increased understanding of their population status. Conservation strategies included reestablishing them to Bryce Canyon National Park during the late 1970s. Today, nearly 150 animals live in park meadows. However, populations still remain precariously low. It is hoped that long-term management of this species and its habitat will lead to secure populations and the eventual delisting of UPDs from the Endangered Species list.

While most prescribed fires are conducted for fuel reduction purposes to protect life and property, this was a good example of how fire can also be used to improve animal habitat while at the same time promoting the NPS mandate of preserving and protecting our valuable natural resources.

