



Bryce Canyon National Park Fire Management

The Role of Information on the Paria Prescribed Fire

In today's technologically orientated world, anytime a public land management agency ignites a prescribed fire, public information before, during and after the burn becomes a vital part of the process. Before the first drop of drip torch fuel hits the ground, an information plan should be in place and utilized. A good example of this recently occurred when Bryce Canyon National Park ignited the 1000+ acre Paria Prescribed Fire in May of 2004.



Paria Rx Burn Boss Bruce Fields at public presentation

Local residents of the Bryce Canyon area have always been concerned

about some of the issues regarding prescribed fire. These issues include smoke management, aesthetics, economics and public health. The Bryce Canyon area is not unlike many other areas of the West where the same issues are voiced by local residents and visitors alike. In Bryce Canyon's case, some of the issues stem from past prescribed fires ignited by various land management agencies that have been ill-timed and one that escaped from the burn unit and became a wildfire that lasted for many weeks.

When faced with these and other public issues regarding prescribed fire, one of the first lines of defense is generally the dispersal of education-based information. Letting the public know when, why, and how you are going to manage prescribed fires can only lead to a better understanding of fire's role in our environment.

In the case of the Paria Prescribed Fire, a public information plan was developed in cooperation with Zion National Park's Fire Information and Education Specialist and managers at Bryce Canyon. In the months prior to the burn, local residents were notified by newsletter and a meeting was held to discuss the burn's objectives and address any public concerns. Flyers and posters were put up at local businesses and throughout the park and a press release was issued.

Once it was determined that a window of opportunity was opening up for specific, predetermined weather conditions which would help mitigate the smoke issue, local officials were notified by phone of the pending burn.

During the burn, fire information officers were on hand at selected locations to talk to park visitors. Others were available to rove into local businesses to answer questions and distribute information. An information board was also established at a key location in the park. A regularly scheduled evening program in the park during the prescribed fire was changed so that park fire officials could address the burn. Approximately 50 visitors showed up for the 45-minute program.



Byrce Canyon staff viewing the Paria Rx from a safe area.

One of the things the park did to address the smoke issue was to install a DataRam monitoring device in the local town of Tropic, prior to and during the burn, to measure the particulate concentration. This device uses scattered light to measure the average and maximum concentration levels of particulates, particle size, humidity, and temperature, with time information for all. It was found that the particulate levels in Tropic during the burn were very low. In fact, the levels were approximately the same as for days preceding the burn.

After the burn was completed, local residents were asked about any issues or concerns they may have from the Paria Prescribed Fire. These concerns were noted and will be addressed in future prescribed fire burn plans for Bryce Canyon.

Another information tool that was utilized during the Paria Prescribed Fire was staff tours of the burn unit. Many times staff members and affiliated associations and park cooperators are overlooked in the information chain. It is many times assumed that these people know the information regarding the prescribed fire because they work there. These assumptions can lead to incorrect information being passed along to park visitors and fellow staff members alike.

During one day of the ignition phase of the prescribed burn, a series of three van tours were organized for staff members in Bryce Canyon's Headquarters. Each one-hour tour was presented by the Fire Information and Education Specialist and included 6-7 staff members. Once it was approved by the burn boss and all the safety issues had been addressed, the staff was driven into the burn unit along a road used as a holding line. From there the staff could safely see the operation and get a better understanding of what the objectives of the burn were. Many on the staff had never seen a prescribed fire operation and were very appreciative for this opportunity. Because of the positive feedback received from the staff, it is hoped that Bryce Canyon can offer these types of tours again for future prescribed fires.

The importance of providing the public and staff with timely information during all phases of prescribed fires cannot be overstated. In cases where a link in the information chain is broken, confusion and misunderstanding can result, making the tough job of managing a prescribed fire even tougher. The Paria Prescribed Fire was a case where the dispersal of information to both the public and park staff was vital to its success.