

Spanning the Gap

Rx: Fire Prescribed burning in a national park



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During the last century, all wildland fires were looked on as being "totally bad." Disastrous wildland fires at the beginning of this century had the National Park Service and other land

management agencies convinced that all fires should be under control by 10:00 a.m. of the day after they started-the "10:00 a.m. policy."

In 1951, studies in the Everglades began to show that fire had an essential role in maintaining forests. Research in Sequoia/Kings Canyon National Park revealed similar benefits. In 1968, the National Park Service began to implement **prescribed fire** programs.

A **prescribed fire** is a wildland fire that is allowed to burn with given limits in order to manage the land and its resources. The objectives of the prescribed fire program in this recreation area are primarily to maintain scenic or historic vistas and to promote the growth of native grass species. In drawing up the policy, fire managers consider alternatives such as mowing and herbicides, and assure that natural and cultural resources are protected from fire and smoke.

A fire "prescription" describes the following: the site to be burned; the resources needed; the weather,

Visitors who come upon a blackened field in the recreation area may be puzzled to learn that the fire was set deliberately--by park managers. This recreation area is one of many national park areas with an approved "prescribed fire" program.

Doug Riley is a Fire Management Officer for the recreation area and also provides program oversight and technical assistance to 16 national park areas in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Here, he explains how the **Prescribed Fire Program** works.

(Left, top) A wildland fire in the Sula Complex, East Fork of the Bitterroot River, Montana (BLM Photo by Jim McColgan)

(Below) Wildland fire specialists ignite a prescribed fire in the recreation area.

fuel (such as trees and leaves), and fire behavior conditions under which the fire will be ignited and allowed to burn; the ignition patterns and techniques that will be used; and the steps that will be taken to insure minimal smoke impact on any nearby residential and visitor areas. Once approved, the prescription awaits a "window" of the right weather and fuel conditions. At this recreation area, there are typically two windows for prescribed fire: one in the late fall, and another in the early spring. It is usually possible to predict 3 to 5 days in advance when a window is approaching.

When on-site observations confirm that the right conditions exist, personnel who specialize in wildland fires ignite the fire and let the fire do its work. Then wildland fire crews completely extinguish the fire, and document the results in writing and on film.

Though visitors may not see prescribed burning in progress, they constantly see its benefits. These include improved vistas along park roads, the chance to see wildlife and wildflowers in newly opened meadow areas, and the encouragement of native species, such as songbirds, in state and national parks.

Unplanned and **uncontrolled** wild-land fires cost millions of taxpayer dollars each year, not including the damage to private property and the toll in human lives and hardship. **Prescribed fires**, however, enable land and resource managers to provide better parklands for visitor use.

