



Hawai'i Volcanoes NEWS RELEASE

December 10, 2004

Mother Nature Started Fire

The Kipuka Pepeiao Fire that scorched 656 acres within Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park was ignited by lightning, fire investigators determined today. Trees, because of their height, are natural lightning rods.

Several old `ohi`a trees located about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile north of Pepeiao Cabin stand as evidence. Pieces of bark, blasted off by the lightning's impact, are scattered some 20 to 30 feet away. Bare trunks sport spiral scars where the lightning followed the moisture within the tree.

Although the fire had a natural ignition source, the fire was fueled and carried by highly flammable non-native fire-prone grasses such as bushy beardgrass, broomsedge, and molasses grass.

Over the last five days, National Park Service and National Forest Service firefighters have fought to suppress the fire's spread. This morning's aerial reconnaissance of Sunday night's burn revealed that the fire had not grown in size.

Forty firefighters and two private helicopters answered today's 7:00 am roll call, returning to Kipuka Pepeiao to "mop up."

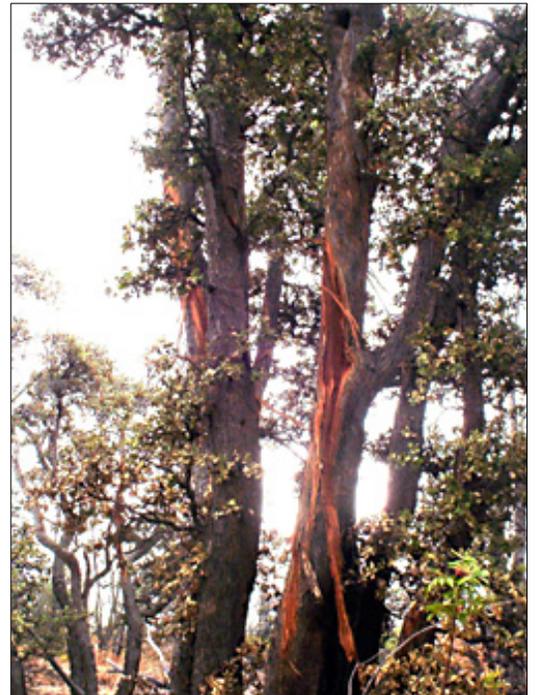
They use scraping and cutting tools, weed eaters, and blowers to clear fuels down to dirt around the burn's perimeter. Where ever possible, they tie into lava flows and other natural fuelbreaks.

They fell charred trees with chainsaws and shovel up and spray down hot embers smoldering beneath the surface.

Helicopters (Volcano Helicopters and Windward Helicopters) fly aerial reconnaissance, ferry firefighters to remote landing zones, and replenish the firefighters' water supplies.

Archeological sites are tagged with flagging and crews lookout for rock walls, petroglyphs, and other features to protect them from firefighting activities and helicopter operations.

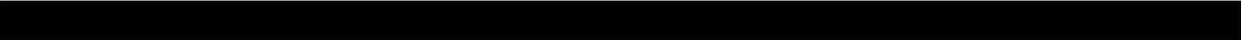
It's slow going. Firefighters walk through the burn mindful that piles of dead vegetation hide cavernous earthcracks. There are smoldering ash pits. And `ohi`a tree snags can topple over on the whim of the wind.



`Ohi`a trees damaged by lightning

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It's smoky and hot. Fighting fires is hazardous and exhausting. The firefighters adhere to a standing order, "fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first." The Kipuka Pepeiao Fire operation remains injury free.

Throughout the day, firefighters continuously monitor the subtle changes in weather. A rise in temperature and wind speed combined with a drop in relative humidity favors flare-ups of smoldering wood and duff.

"We're very pleased that the burn withstood today's 30 mile an hour wind gusts and drop in relative humidity," said Joe Molhoek, Pacific Area Fire Management Officer. "We've got it 100% contained but there are still some stubborn 'smokes' out there."

Six firefighters supported by one private helicopter will return to the fire zone tomorrow.