

Hackberry Fires: Why now?



Cattle wander through the burned zone the day after fire swept through.

At 70,736 acres, the Hackberry Complex of fires is the largest on record for the east Mojave. The Mojave ecosystem is in a state of flux, impacted by grazing, invasion by non-native grasses and weeds, and cyclic changes in weather patterns. In recent years, scientists have pointed to the increase in non-native grasses and increased fire starts caused by people as reasons for an increase in the number of fires. Others have predicted that removing grazing would increase the severity of fires. Now that we have had a big one,

many are speculating about the causes.

“There are always special interests who will try to use this to their advantage,” said Jim Andre, Director of the Granite Mountains Research Center. “At many levels, from ranching proponents, to the people who fight the fires, to environmentalists, there are going to be some who say things on the extreme side.”

No matter your point of view, its a fact that the historic winter rainy

season created an unprecedented fuel load. With multiple dry lightning strikes, this fire was destined to burn. “Fire is very likely a part of the east Mojave,” said Andre. “In the pinyon zone, looking at about 30 fires over the last 100 years indicates that its somewhat frequent. This was a natural ignition, it was a heavy fuel year...regardless of weeds, regardless of fire suppression history, regardless of grazing, there would have been fuel to burn and we would have had a fire.”

In the area around Hole-in-the-Wall, fires started on lands currently under grazing. “The allotment that’s still active is where most of the highest amount of consumption of fuel occurred,” said Matt Brooks, USGS researcher who has been studying fire in the east Mojave. Brooks emphasized that we can’t draw conclusions from that fact alone. “That’s also the area where there is more productive vegetation, so there are all sorts of confounding factors.”

Mojave National Preserve

Hackberry Complex Fires

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



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Dry lightning storm sparks fires; 70,736 acres burned

This winter brought plentiful rains to the desert, producing abundant plant growth and one of the best wildflower seasons in decades. As spring moved to summer, many understood that this plant growth would dry out and potentially burn as the dry heat of summer settled in.

When lightning strikes caused seven fires to break out on Wednesday, June 22, National Park Service rangers and fire crews immediately responded, fighting the fires and calling in additional crews. The next morning, rangers cleared out the campgrounds and closed roads. By 11:00 a.m. on Thursday, over 200 firefighters were working the blazes, and a highly trained fire management team, the Southern California Interagency Incident Management Team 1, was on the scene. In spite of this support, high fuel loads, low humidity, high temperatures, sustained winds, and steep slopes combined to create extreme conditions, causing the fires

to blow up. In three short hours on Thursday, June 23, the fire raced from just north of Hole-in-the-Wall all the way to Mid Hills and beyond.

The weather prediction for Friday, June 24, was not good. A passing dry cold front was expected to bring strong gusty winds. More firefighters and other resources were called in. The fire continued to spread into the southern end of the New York Mountains and along Cedar Canyon Road.

On Saturday, with 821 firefighters working the fireline, and more moderate weather conditions, the fire was about 15% contained by the end of the day. Fire managers felt they had turned the corner, and by the end of the day on Sunday, June 26, the fire was 65% contained. The fire was declared 100% contained on Monday, June 27 at 6:00 p.m.

The Burned Area Emergency Response Team also arrived on Monday

and are now evaluating the potential post-fire threats to both cultural and natural resources. A stabilization plan will be prepared to guide the National Park Service in minimizing the impacts of both the fire and the suppression activities.

Thank you

The Hackberry Complex Fires posed a tremendous challenge to park staff, local residents, and firefighters from across the region. Park rangers and firefighters acted quickly and effectively as fires ignited across the park. The Southern California Interagency Incident Management Team efficiently organized and managed a complex response involving over 1,000 firefighters. Property owners came together in helping to identify and notify absentee landowners. Their losses were great, and they have our support and sympathy.

Mary Martin, Superintendent

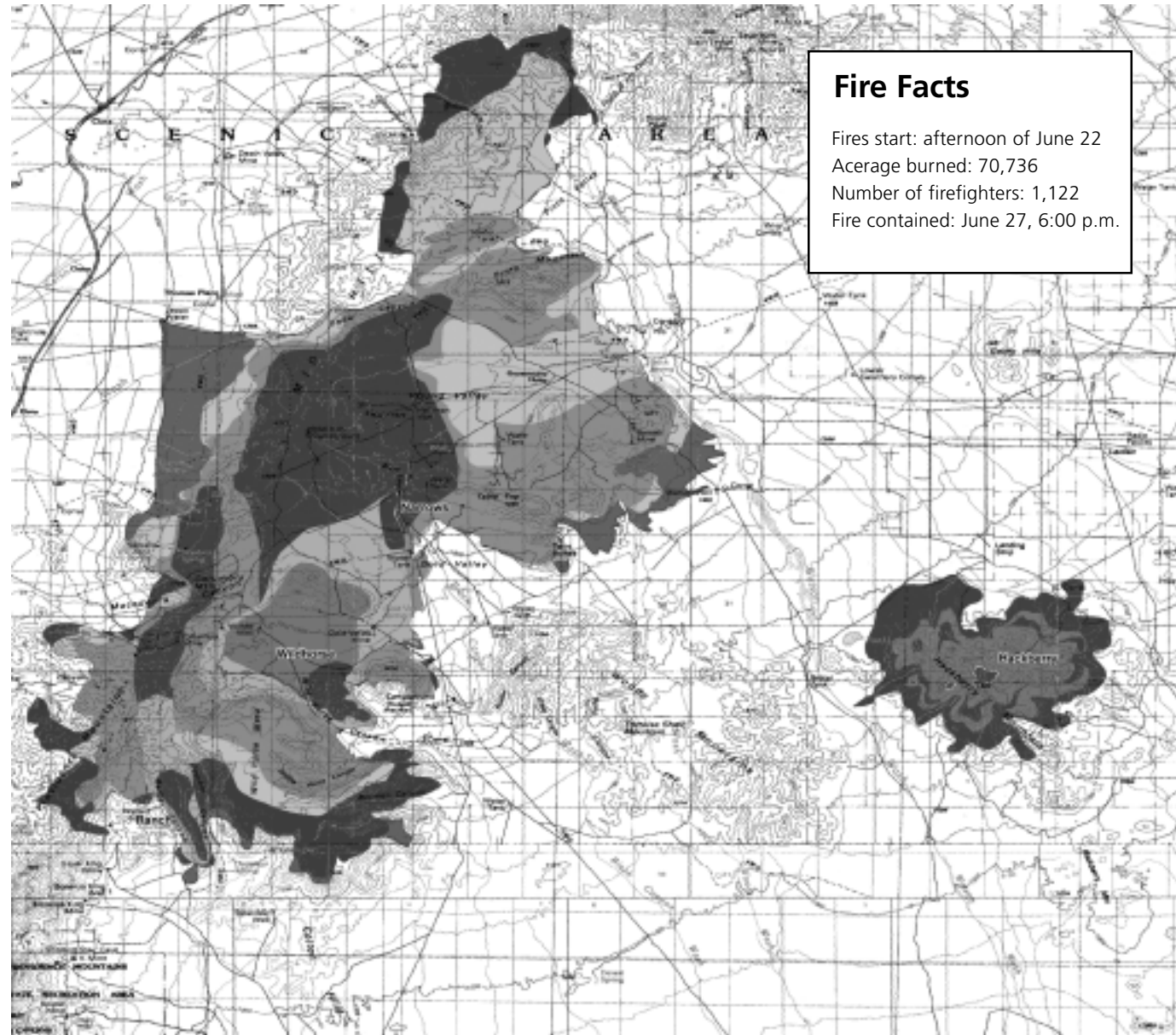


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Hackberry Complex Fires



Firefighters work through the night to save homes

71L Ranch

Smoke from what would become the Ranch Fire was first spotted on Wednesday night, June 22. On Thursday morning, an engine crew from Hole-in-the-Wall Fire Center arrived at the 71L Ranch, where a 200 acre fire was slowly spreading to the south. A second crew from Joshua Tree National Park was dispatched to the fire, and the two crews worked with the Blair family to build over a half-mile of fire line, holding the fire north of the ranch. Ranch owner Rob Blair used his water tanker truck to supply the engine with water. A helicopter dropped six buckets of water. The crew stayed until about 10:00 p.m. "I felt comfortable with the resources on hand," said Engine Captian Shane Littlefield. "If the fire had made a run at us, we had a good area to protect their structures and hold the fire."

After the crew left, Rob and Kate Blair stayed up through the night putting out hot spots. "We looked up there and saw a lot of little flare ups. We couldn't go to bed thinking that it might pop up again," said Kate Blair. The Blairs hosted eight hotshot crews who were working further north for several more days.

Round Valley

On the afternoon of June 23, fire behavior was extreme. Park rangers evacuated a handful of people from private cabins and trailers in Round Valley. The fire ripped through the area that afternoon, also burning through Mid Hills Campground. Fire spread was rapid; between 4:00 p.m. and 5:30 p.m., the fire grew by 13,100 acres. In the evening

after the fire swept through, conditions were too dangerous to check each cabin; but the view from Black Canyon Road seemed to indicate that the fire may have consumed all of Round Valley.

Shortly after 10:00 p.m., local firefighters who were familiar with the roads and cabins had finished their shift on the Ranch Fire and went to Round Valley to survey the area, and found a number of structures standing. Engine Captain Shane Littlefield called Incident Commander Norm Walker who dispatched additional resources to help protect the cabins. The two Engines from Hole-in-the-Wall went to Round Valley at about 11:00 p.m., along with the Diamond Mountain Hot Shots, two engines from two engines from Northern California. The crews worked through the night, moving on to protect homes along Cedar Canyon Road near Forth of July Canyon.

On Friday morning, the fire shifted and began moving back toward Round Valley. Five fresh engines from Joshua Tree, Apple Valley, and Northern California were dispatched to continued providing protection throughout the day. In addition to firing out around buildings and trailers, the crews applied compressed air foam to insulate the structures.

Juan and Pam Reyes' cabin was among those saved by these efforts. "We wouldn't have anything up there now if it wasn't for the firefighters," said Pam Reyes. "They went above and beyond the call of duty. Their kindness, their professionalism-I can't say enough about them."

Lessons from a recent fire: how quickly will plants return?

By Rob Fulton, Desert Studies Center, California State University

In July 2002, a wildfire burned 600 acres of shrubs and juniper trees south of Mid Hills Campground. In many respects, this fire was similar to the recent fires: it started by lightning, was driven by wind, and burned in relatively dense vegetation of high flammability, including juniper, sagebrush, and antelope brush. Unlike the recent fires, the winds died off, thunderstorms brought rain, and ridges and roads acted as firebreaks to assist firefighters in controlling what was, nevertheless, an unusually large fire for this region.

Permanent photographic plots were established within and adjacent to

this burned area a few months later, aimed at monitoring the recovery of vegetation over time. This repeated photography, together with field observations, can help in understanding how the recovery of the recently burned area will occur over the next few years.

Despite lower than average rainfall in spring of 2003, several kinds of wildflowers emerged and some perennial shrubs began to resprout. Soil is a good insulator; it protected some plant seeds and roots. Three years out, over 35 species of plants are present in the burned area. Some perennial shrubs and herbs have begun to grow from surviving root

systems. Seedlings of common shrubs have taken hold in response to this year's above average rainfall, and several annual wildflowers and grasses are well-established. Some species, like Utah juniper, boxthorn, blackbrush and Mojave mound cactus show no signs of recovery, and will likely take decades or centuries to return to pre-fire abundance.

Some non-native species, primarily red brome grass and stork's bill, are prevalent on the 2002 burn site, and will likely occur in the recently burned sites in the future. Invasive species such as these that crowd out native plants will continue to pose a growing challenge to land managers.

FIRE SEASON HAS JUST BEGUN: TAKE PRECAUTIONS NOW

While everyone expected this to be a severe fire season, not many thought it would begin so soon. With many months of hot, dry weather ahead, it's important do to all you can to prevent fires from starting, and to protect your home and property.

- **Clear dead wood and dense vegetation** within at least 30 feet from your house, and move firewood away from your house, fences, and decks.

- **Do not toss cigarettes or matches on the ground.** One out of every 10 wildland fires in the U.S. was caused by a careless smoker.

- **Keep your vehicle in good condition and turn off the air conditioner when traveling up long grades to prevent overheating.** Every year, overheated engines lead to car fires that spread to the surrounding desert.

- **If you park on the roadside, be careful that the hot underside of your exhaust system does not come into contact with vegetation.** Dried grasses can be easily ignited, spreading fire into the surrounding desert.

For detailed information about preparing your home to withstand wildfire, visit www.firewise.org.