



2011 Fire Season in Review



Firefighters prepare to protect the historic Quinn Patrol Cabin during the Lion Fire.

NPS photo by Lyle Pope (Engine72)

It was a relatively quiet fire season for the parks this year, with 2,470 acres burned by lightning fires, prescribed fires, or human-caused fires. Historically, 15,000-20,000 acres burned, on average, in the parks in a given year.

Several prescribed fires were completed in early summer, including the Ash Mountain and Hole-in-the-Wall projects.

Most significant was the Redwood Mountain Prescribed Fire. This 628 acre fire occurred in the birthplace of the parks' prescribed fire program. The wet year and deliberate ignition techniques by firefighters helped to restore fire to a dense thicket of sequoia regeneration from a 1977 prescribed fire.

The largest fire in the parks was 1,105 acres of the 20,675 acre Lion Fire. This fire was started on the Sequoia National Forest by lightning and a small part of it grew into Sequoia National Park. Firefighters could safely contain the fire along the Windy Ridge in the southern part of the park instead of along the park/forest boundary. Wildfire response functions outside of man-made boundaries and requires interagency cooperation.

The parks' helitack, Crew 91, Engine 72, and the Arrowhead Hotshots all worked on the Lion Fire.

The parks actively protected the Quinn Patrol Cabin, foxtail pine forest, and habitat of Little Kern golden trout throughout this operation.

The Quinn Patrol Cabin, on the National Register of Historic Places, was constructed in 1906 by the US Cavalry. It is noted for its unusual cabin construction with vertical rather than horizontal log walls. Burnout operations around the cabin removed the fuel in advance of the main fire.

Although the parks received significant lightning this year, most strikes were high in elevation and showed little to no potential for growth.

However, the Willow Fire was contained at eight acres. This fire, also in the southern part of Sequoia National Park, showed some potential for growth and was an ideal candidate to manage for ecological restoration. Its close proximity to the Kern River drainage and the potential for continued smoke to this area after the Lion Fire led to the decision to contain the fire.



A firefighter holds the fireline during the Huckleberry Prescribed Fire.

NPS photo by Deb Schweizer

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2011 Fire Season, continued...



Although conditions were good for prescribed fire because of the unusually high snowpack that the parks received (wetter years moderate fire intensity and provide better control), additional prescribed fire projects were put on hold for the summer months to provide a break from smoke for nearby communities.

Fall started with two prescribed fire projects, the Swale East and Huckleberry prescribed fires.

Both areas have had previous prescribed fires and are within their normal fire cycle. As a result, fire behavior was excellent with denser pockets of fuels being consumed while wetter areas or areas with less fuel did not burn.



The Round Meadow Prescribed Fire was conducted in the former Giant Forest Lodge area, 13 years after the removal of buildings and roads in the Giant Forest Restoration project. Restoration staff wanted to maintain the natural fire cycle in this area and encourage the natural process that allows giant sequoia regeneration. They observed that sequoias saplings that resulted from fire grew healthier than some that were planted during the restoration efforts.

The final project of the season was the Nature Trail Prescribed Fire in Cedar Grove. Fire managers took advantage of a late season window. Most visitor services were suspended for the season and visitation to Cedar Grove was minimal. This timing significantly reduced the number of visitors and employees that were affected by the localized smoke impacts.



Redwood Mountain Prescribed Fire:

One of the goals of the Redwood Mountain Prescribed Fire was to reduce some of the thick sequoia regeneration that grew as a result of a 1977 prescribed fire (top photo). Captain Pedro Gutierrez of the parks' Crew 91 ignites in very thick undergrowth (middle photo). Approximately 50% of the sequoia regeneration was consumed, leaving the remaining trees healthier because of more access to sunlight, water, and nutrients (bottom photo).

NPS photos by Tony Caprio

A First-Hand Look at the Wallow Fire

Submitted by Captain Larry Smith, Engine 51



Extreme fire behavior witnessed on the Wallow Fire.

Photo by Jayson Coil

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks have two wildland fire engines that specialize in wildland fire suppression and emergency assistance. These engines are staffed seven days a week from June through October.

While they are stationed for response throughout the parks, they are also trained and available to respond to wildfires and other emergencies throughout the nation. In the past, these engines have responded to fires in Colorado, Montana, Idaho, Oregon, Utah, Nevada, and, of course, California.

Earlier this year, Grant Grove's Engine 51 responded to the Wallow Fire in Arizona; the largest wildfire in the state's recorded history. It grew to 538,049 acres, surpassing the 2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire by 71,000 acres.

This was the first campaign fire for the seasonal staff of Engine 51, and the first opportunity for the entire staff to witness fire behavior in Arizona and New Mexico.

During this assignment, Engine 51 performed many of the tasks required of wildland firefighters including suppression, mop-up, structure protection, and public information.

The Fire Grows Fast

On June 18, the wind increased and the relative humidity dropped to one percent; extreme weather conditions for wildland fire in an area already suffering from an extended drought. The resulting fire behavior caused multiple spot fires that threatened the town of Luna.

Engine 51's assignment, along with the remainder of their task force, was to protect homes, ranches, and infrastructure (including water-treatment and electrical facilities) during this wind-driven event. Through the work of many firefighters and some favorable wind shifts, the fire was steered around the town of Luna.

Firefighters worked a 36-hour shift and a completed a nine-mile firing operation in their efforts to protect the town.

After the town of Luna was saved, the fire continued to grow and eventually encompassed nearly forty-thousand acres in two days. It produced smoke columns visible to commercial airlines flying at thirty-thousand feet and impacting the city of Albuquerque, nearly 200 miles away, with smoke.



The smoke column from Wallow Fire. In this case, the column is rotating, an indication of significant fire intensity.

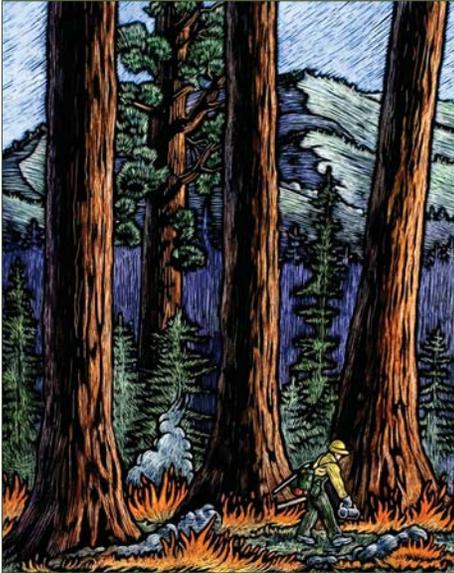
NWS/USFS photo by Brent Watcher



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Farewell to David Bartlett



"Ending my career in these parks has been a special honor," Dave said. "I got to lead the finest bunch of fire management staff in the country."

David Bartlett, Fire Management Officer at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, retired at the end of 2011. His leadership has been a great asset to the parks' program.

"Dave is going to be missed in fire management," said Chief Ranger Kevin Hendricks. "He understood that fire is an awesome force that must be respected. His efforts to develop relationships with interagency partners, air districts, and neighboring communities maintained a high standard for excellence and responsibility for fire management in these parks."

Dave has been the fire management officer for Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks since 2005. He moved to the parks as the first Kings District fire management officer in 2001. Dave began his fire career with the US Forest Service in Montana in 1983 and joined the National Park Service in 1987. Dave moved into fire program management in 1996 when he became the Fire Management Officer at New River Gorge National River in West Virginia.