



Counting Sheep: 2010 Fire Season in Review

It was a quiet fire season for much of the United States this year, but the story for the southern Sierra was the Sheep Fire.

This wildfire was started by lightning on July 16th in Kings Canyon National Park and grew onto the Sequoia National Forest. Located in the cliffs south of Cedar Grove, this fire proved to be a challenge for firefighter access and smoke management. However, the long-term benefits including reduced fire risk are significant.



Members of the parks' Crew 91 construct fireline along Lookout Ridge. NPS photo.

The eastern and western flanks of this fire tell a very different story. To the east, the 2006 Roaring Wildland Fire and the 2008 Cedar Bluffs Prescribed Fire had removed forest fuels that could carry the fire. This example of *self-limiting* fire is the result of returning the natural fire mosaic to the area.

Contrast the western flank: this area had not seen fire in over 100 years as the result of previous suppression actions. Thick forest fuels fed the fire in the steep terrain that is the signature of Kings Canyon. These fuels also created smoky conditions for Cedar Grove, Hume Lake, areas in the Kings Canyon, and east-side communities.

Several efforts were made to slow or stop the fire's western spread. For example, fire crews constructed fire line along Lookout Ridge (along the park/forest boundary) to slow fire growth. However, this line did not hold because of steep cliffbands that the crews

could not safely access. The line did delay the fire spread to the west for approximately two weeks.

The fire's western spread was ultimately contained on a ridge near Deer Meadow. After Lookout Ridge, that was the first safe place that firefighters could hold the fire; however, that allowed the fire to more than double in size. It was contained at 9,020 acres, 3, 125 acres on the park.

Where the Sheep Fire started is one of the last areas that has not recently seen fire in Cedar Grove. Because of the unusually wet and cool year, and because this fire started at a high elevation, an area with tremendous fuels accumulation was treated with a moderate backing fire. It even backed into the Monarch Sequoia Grove on the Giant Sequoia National Monument. The fire burned mostly across the forest floor, cleaning up the accumulated debris without consuming the stands of trees above it.

What does the Sheep Fire accomplish for the parks and forest? It will reduce the risk of an unwanted fire in the upcoming years, promote biodiversity and regeneration, and prevent subsequent fires from being larger, more destructive, and smokier. These are significant accomplishments for both safety and resource management. This could not have happened without the patience and support of employees and residents who were part of a significant event that helps preserve these parks (and forests) for future generations.



Recent fires under desirable conditions reduce the risk of unwanted fires near Cedar Grove.

Fire Review Continued...



Ash Mountain Prescribed Fire.

NPS Photo.



Aerial ignitions on the Silliman Prescribed Fire.

NPS Photo.



Crew 91 members Roberto Castillo, Elliot Nauert, and Allen Welch (with saw), Lodgepole South Mechanical Thinning.

NPS Photo.

2010 Fuels Treatment Projects Completed

The parks planned 13 fuels reduction projects (prescribed fire and mechanical thinning) totaling 3,788 acres this year. Six of these projects, as well as pile burning, were completed for 437 acres.

A cool, wet spring delayed the beginning of prescribed fire opportunities. Although weather and fuel moistures were ideal for prescribed fire, declining air quality as the summer progressed prevented the start of further projects. Firefighters then focused on response to the Sheep Fire for the duration of the season.

The parks recognized that the smoke impacts from the Sheep Fire were significant and passed on fall prescribed fire opportunities. Crews shifted to pile burning after the fall rains.

The parks treated 3,562 acres with fire or mechanical thinning this year. Historically, 17,500 acres burned annually (on average) in what is now the parks.

Ash Mountain Rx (25 acres)

Viewpoint Rx (Cedar Grove, 73 acres)

Bobcat Rx (Giant Forest, 97 acres)

Silliman and Wuksachi Rx (Lodgepole, 137 acres)

Lodgepole South Mechanical Thinning Project (37 acres)

Pile burning from previous thinning projects (68 acres)

From Samoa to the Sequoias: One Firefighter's Perspective

Meet Charles Ve'a Ve'a. Charles, 22, is from American Samoa where he had worked two seasons with an NPS trail maintenance crew. He joined Grant Grove's Engine 51 this year. He and other Samoans are trained in wildland firefighting by the NPS for developmental and employment opportunities.

Interview by Deb Schweizer.

How did you learn about wildland fire? I never recall thinking about fire until Larry (Captain Larry Smith, Engine 51) and others came and taught the class. It's not really an issue in Samoa. I never thought about how dangerous, normal, and awesome of a force it could be.

Why Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks? (Laughs). I had a friend with Yosemite Fire trying to have me go there and think about a career with fire. Later, Larry called and asked several of us to apply and I did not want to miss the chance.

What was it like landing in Fresno? Confusing. I had never left Samoa before. It has a small airport and you can ask anyone for help. Travelling through Hawaii and San Francisco was quite different from that.

Coming to Grant Grove? Amazed. It was still snowy when I got there. I have never seen snow except on TV. Snow in real life: What is this? I wanted to touch it. I love snow! It is the most beautiful place (Grant). I talk to my friends and say, "I have the biggest trees just a mile from where I live."



Charles during a clean-up day in Wilsonia.

NPS photo.



Charles pre-treats forest fuels across the Kings River during the Sheep Fire.
NPS photo.

What do you miss most from Samoa? Games. I am very active. We play rugby and go swimming in the ocean.

What is most different for you being here? Being responsible. I like being spoiled by my parents (laughing). Here I have to cook and do laundry.

What did you learn about fire? How to spin the weather (temperature, relative humidity, and wind readings), how to use water, and the different parts of the engine. I learned how fast fire can move with low relative humidity. Fire does not move that fast in Samoa. I have learned to feel comfortable with my crew. We look out for each other as brothers. They help me a lot because they respect that this has been different for me.

What meal do you want most when you get back? Pork done the Samoan way. They cook it on a sort of outdoor kitchen of heated rocks called *umu*. Served with taro or bananas.

Your favorite meal here? The sequoia burger (served at the Grant Grove Restaurant). Or Larry's BBQ.

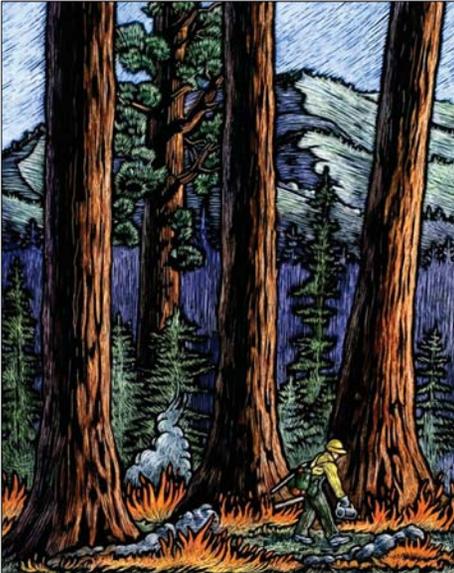
Are you coming back? I plan to... if Larry wants me back.



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks
47050 Generals Highway
Three Rivers, CA 93271-9651

Standard Mail G-83
U.S. Postage and Fees Paid
U.S. Department of the Interior



NPS/©Rick Wheeler

EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Writer / Editor
Deb Schweizer
(559) 565-3703
debra_schweizer@nps.gov

Park Superintendent
Karen Taylor-Goodrich

Fire Management Officer
David Bartlett

For more information
www.nps.gov/seki/naturescience/fire.htm

Postal Customer



Sheep Fire photos: Hiking in to the fireline (top left), the western containment line (top right), and night operations along the Kings River (bottom right).



NPS photos.