National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cedar Breaks National Monument

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Cedar Breaks National Monument Fire Management

NPS Fire Use Modules Perform Emergency Fuel Reduction Treatments

Following the driest winter on record, a thunderstorm with accompanying lightning rumbled through SW Utah on June 1, 2002, igniting several fires. Most were quickly suppressed due to the extreme fire danger in the area and their location on or near private lands. One, called the Big Wash Fire, was in a rugged and hard to access area south of Utah State Highway 14 and could not be easily suppressed. A Type II Incident Management Team was called in on June 5 to manage suppression activities on the 150-acre fire. All was going well until June 8 and 9, when a major windstorm, with gusts of over 50 m.p.h., passed through the area. The winds pushed the fire over six-miles in a matter of hours and increased it to almost 5,000 acres. The fire reached Highway 14 from the south, and started spotting over the road, causing great concern for local land management agencies.

Cedar Breaks National Monument (CEBR) is located approximately 1.5 miles north of Highway 14 and is surrounded by the Dixie National Forest, which contains extensive stands of beetle-killed spruce trees. The fear of the Management Team and CEBR officials was that if the fire reached these dead trees north of the highway, it would be extremely difficult to control and could possibly burn many more acres with CEBR right in its path. It was decided to initiate emergency fuel reduction around the highest priority buildings in CEBR (some of which are historic log structures with shake roofs) in hopes of protecting them if the fire reached there.

Emergency fuel reduction treatments began in CEBR on June 9 and consisted of removal of a significant number of the dead spruce trees, removal of brush and limbing-up of trees surrounding structures, and disposal of the debris. The protection measures also included installing and keeping charged hoses in place around the structures in case the fire reached them. The treatments were completed on June 16. As always, safety was the number one priority in performing these treatments.

The crews utilized minimum impact techniques while performing their work including flush cutting stumps and angling them away from the view of structures and roads, removing large debris from felled trees and carrying debris away from the site instead of dragging it. Since two of the structures are on the National Register of Historic Places, and other significant historic resources were at risk, a fireline qualified cultural resource advisor was on site during the treatments to provide guidance in cultural landscape preservation and in the event historic objects were uncovered.

The crews performing the fuel reduction treatments were members of the Zion, Yellowstone, Bandelier and Saguaro National Park Service (NPS) Fire Use Modules and totaled 27 individuals. These NPS modules are part of nine that based out of national parks throughout the country. Their primary purpose is to assist the NPS (and other agencies when needed) with fire use, in the areas of planning, fire behavior monitoring, ignition and holding. They also assist in prescribed fire preparation, fire effects and mechanical fuels reduction (which was what was utilized in this case). Also assisting in the fuel reduction treatments at CEBR were members of the Zion National Park Fuels and Helitak Crews.

Even though firefighters successfully kept the Big Wash Fire south of Highway 14 and the emergency fuel reduction treatments at CEBR did not have to be tested, the incident did serve to reinforce the fact that this area is very susceptible to wildfire. These protection measures were carried out on an emergency basis, but an Environmental Assessment for a fuel reduction project in the same area had already been prepared last year, and a larger scale project is planned for early next year. It is a good example of how an urgent (and possibly disastrous) incident can put land management agencies in a position where they need to react immediately to protect vital resources. Thanks to the quick actions and hard work of the NPS Fire Use Modules, the structures at CEBR are now in a better position to survive the next wildfire that may threaten them.

CEBR cabin before treatment.

CEBR cabin after treatment.