



Zion National Park Fire Management



Timber Top Fire Use Complex

During the summer fire season, what we generally see and hear on our TV's, radios and computers are stories about the destructive nature of wildfires. Headlines such as; "Fires Destroy Homes," "Fires Force Evacuations," and "Thousands of Acres Lost," are all too common in today's media. While these events do happen and certainly warrant media attention, numerous other fires that provide resource benefits are overlooked by the press. A good example of one of these resource benefit fires was Zion National Park's Timber Top Fire Use Complex in July/August 2003.

The Timber Top Fire Use Complex began on July 17 from a lightning storm that passed through the area igniting numerous wildland fires. The complex consisted of two fires located on isolated mesas in the Kolob Canyons section of the park. This fire complex was also within the Kolob Mesas Research Natural Area which includes three isolated mesa tops: Timber Top, Nagunt and Gregory Mountain. Because of their isolated nature and therefore protection from past human disturbance, these mesas are influenced almost entirely by natural ecological processes. They serve as important natural reference areas of the mixed conifer forest and mountain shrub vegetation types and related animal communities. The management of these areas allows natural processes to predominate, including naturally occurring fire, geologic and climatic events. Naturally-ignited fires (lightning) are allowed to burn if all safety and fire management standards are met.

Due to the fires isolated locations in the Research Natural Areas, the fact that no improvements were threatened and that there were no safety concerns for the public, it was decided to manage the fires as fire use fires or fire for resource benefits. This management strategy allowed the park to let the fires perform their natural role as they have been doing on top of these mesas for thousands of years.

The park formed a local Interagency Fire Use Team, consisting of staff members from the National Park Service, Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. A maximum manageable area (MMA) was established for the complex with contingency plans in place in case the fire threatened the MMA. A morning briefing was conducted by the Fire Use Team every day to assess the fire's status and plan management activities. The fire was monitored daily by Fire Effects Monitors who recorded hourly weather conditions and fire behavior. Zion's Fire Use Module, along with other members of Zion's firefighting crew, were also assigned to the fire. A helicopter water dipping tank was established along the park roadway; close to the fire, in the event it was needed.

The fire complex eventually burned 365 acres over a three-week period. Fire behavior ranged from very active to light, depending on the weather conditions and the fuels encountered by the fire. On 4-5 of the active fire days, smoke columns could be seen from over 50 miles away. Isolated smokes from the fire were visible for weeks along the park roadway. Smoke impacts to park visitors and the local residents were a daily concern, but overall they were minimal. The fire complex was officially declared out on September 25.

Information and education played a major role in the success of this fire use complex. The fire could easily be seen from the upper section of the Kolob Canyons Scenic Drive. An information station was established at the end of the scenic drive where the vast majority of the visitors who traveled the road ended up. The station was staffed daily with at least two information officers who in some cases also performed the fire effects monitor duties. A 24-hour information bulletin board was put up and updated daily with current fire information and photos of the complex. Information officers would contact an average of 200-300 visitors per day (with weekend totals being higher). It was a perfect opportunity for the visitors to safely view a fire and to be educated as to the reasons why Zion chose the management option they did. Visitors could see how the fire was isolated on the mesa tops and not posing any direct threats and that suppressing the fire would have been expensive and most importantly, dangerous to firefighters.

While many fire use fires are still considered by the public to be detrimental to resources, the Timber Top Complex is a good example of one that was viewed and understood as making the right management decision to utilize it for its resource benefits. Land management agencies should take advantage of all opportunities to educate and inform the public about the benefit of fire use fires. It may be a slow process to undo all of the years of the "suppression mentality" and switch to a more open policy regarding fire management, but in the long run it will be better for our public lands and those who enjoy them.



The role of information/education was vital in public acceptance of the Timber Top Complex.



Aerial view of the Timber Top Complex showing its mosaic burn pattern.

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