

Fire Used To Benefit Resources: WILDLAND FIRE USE

Inyo National Forest

September 2003

This summer, 19 lightning-caused fires have been allowed to burn to benefit natural resources in the Eastern Sierra. This type of management is called Wildland Fire Use.

Wildland Fire Use is the management of naturally ignited fires to achieve resource benefits where fire is a major component of the ecosystem, and where specific pre-stated resource management objectives in predefined geographic areas can be accomplished. The goal of managing fires for resource benefits is to allow fire to resume its natural role in the ecosystem.

Many natural resource values can be enhanced by allowing fire to play its natural role where private property and social values can be protected. For centuries lightning-caused fires have created a mosaic of different vegetative types, such as a mixture of wildlife habitats, while eliminating heavy fuel accumulation. In turn, these vegetative patterns create a diversity of habitats. Fires also cycle nutrients back into the soil, and help regulate insect and disease levels. All these benefits are essential for a healthy ecosystem.

Managing fires for resource benefits is not a new practice. Prescribed burning has been used for the past 25 years to accomplish specific resource management objectives, and use of naturally ignited fires can help achieve the same goals. Prescribed fire can reduce heavy fuel accumulations (litter, branches, fallen trees, etc.) caused by years of fire suppression, reducing the potential for large intense, catastrophic fires in the future. Recent management direction from the National Fire Plan and the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment emphasizes the use of natural and prescribed fires to reduce fuels in our National Forests.

Many considerations go into making the decision to manage a fire for resource benefit. Only naturally caused fires can be managed as Fire Use. Human-caused fires must always be suppressed. A Forest must have an approved Fire Management Plan (FMP) in place to use Wildland Fire Use. Without an approved FMP naturally caused fire must be suppressed. FMPs give fire managers the option to implement an appropriate management response, which may be to exclusively manage a fire for resource benefits, or may include suppression, ranging from aggressive initial attack to a combination of strategies to achieve confinement. A site-specific Wildfire Fire Implementation Plan must also be prepared and approved before a fire may be managed for resource benefit. This plan is developed after the fire has started and gives specific direction for management of the fire.

To determine whether to implement Fire Use, fire planners must assess risk, predict fire behavior and growth, plan for contingencies, determine the maximum limits of the fire area (called maximum manageable areas or MMA), and define trigger points that signal the need to carryout measures to mitigate threats to personnel, public safety and the MMA. Fire managers may use a full range of mitigation actions to check, direct, or delay the spread of fire to protect human safety, private property, and keep fire within MMAs. These actions could include fire line construction, helicopter bucket and air tanker retardant drops, and burnouts. All mitigation actions, however, are based on environmental considerations and minimizing long-term impacts to the land. Fire managers must also carefully coordinate with State and County agencies responsible for smoke management. If air quality levels deteriorate to a point specified by law or other guidelines, fire managers can decide to take appropriate management actions to suppress a fire.

Teams of skilled and mobile personnel, called Fire Use Modules, are dedicated primarily to prescribed fire management. These are national and interagency resources, available throughout the prescribed fire season, that can ignite, hold and monitor prescribed fires. There are six organized Fire Use Teams nationwide.

More information about Wildland Fire Use can be found on the internet at www.fs.fed.us/fire.