Making the most of prescribed burns on Stanislaus National Forest

Record-breaking fires during the past 12 months has revitalized the discussion about managing public lands and the role fire plays.

By Jason Kuiken, Forest Supervisor, Stanislaus National Forest

Fire hasn't always been feared the way it is now. Native Americans historically used fire to manage the landscape. It was easier to manage, however, since there were fewer communities located next to lands being burned.

The Stanislaus National Forest also has used fire as a way to reduce the fuel load on the land. For many years fire was integral to forest health. As rural populations increased and communities began building near the forest, the consequences of fire escaping a specific area also increased. A new term gained popularity: the wildland-urban interface. WUI, as it is known, is simply the place where wildland and urban population centers meet. The interface between wildland and urban is growing and that's placing greater stress on good forest health.

The more woody debris, downed trees and small scrub brush located on the forest, the higher the fuel load, or the amount of material available to sustain a fire. To manage the fuel load, forest managers use what we call *prescribed burns.* A prescribed burn is similar to the process a doctor undertakes when prescribing something to a patient. A doctor examines the patient, getting information about what is causing problems, relies on his or her learned expertise and writes out a prescription.

A prescribed burn begins with forest managers assessing the forest health, identifying the most effective ways to decrease fuel loads and preparing a burn plan. A burn plan must cover 22 elements, including the specific area, targeted weather conditions, the type and amount of fuels and possible hazards that might be experienced. All prescribed burns are monitored and conducted in accordance with state and county air quality guidelines and are closely coordinated with local county air quality control districts. In addition, forest managers must have a National Environmental Protection Act, or NEPA, analysis completed in order to burn a specific area.

I, as the forest supervisor, must review and approve every burn plan on the Stanislaus National Forest. It's my responsibility to ensure the safety of the forest and our neighboring communities. I take that responsibility very seriously. The fire management leaders work closely with local county agencies to ensure they are aware of and prepared for our prescribed burns.

The photos help show how effective prescribed burns can be. In the before photo you can see how much fuel is available to burn in the event a wildfire was started. Low-level vegetation can help a fire grow quickly. In the after photo you can see there are only standing trees and a small amount of leaf litter, which means there's not much to fuel a wildfire.

There are risks to prescribed burns, but the burn plan helps us minimize those risks. Knowing the terrain and the forecasted weather conditions means we are able to manage the fire within known parameters that will decrease the threat of a rapidly expanding fire. There are also other irritants that accompany prescribed burns, like smoky conditions. Aside from the fear some folks get when seeing smoke in the forest, it can impact air quality, although I stress again, we work with air quality districts to closely monitor and remain within their guidelines.

We must improve forest health. For years, public attention was focused on suppressing fires, not living with them and we tried to comply. The bark beetle infestation in the Sierra Nevada and five years of drought dealt a serious blow to forest health. Fuel loads on the Stanislaus are very high in some locations and we are committed to responsibly using prescribed burns to decrease the danger of large, catastrophic fires on the forest.

By Jason Kuiken
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