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News Release

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Tusayan Ranger District achieves goal of zero human-caused fires

Tusayan, Ariz., March 18, 2015—For Immediate Release. In calendar year 2014, the Tusayan Ranger District of the Kaibab National Forest achieved a longtime goal of zero human-caused wildfires. According to forest wildfire records, the last time the district had zero human fires was in 1965, exactly 50 years ago.

“Over the last three years, we have had a specific, written goal of reducing human-caused wildfires on the district to zero for the entire calendar year,” said Quentin Johnson, fire management officer for the Tusayan Ranger District. “Given that the district receives millions of visitors each year because it is located immediately adjacent to Grand Canyon National Park, we knew this would be an incredible challenge.”

Johnson added that while the district had been averaging about seven human-caused wildfires per year over the last 20 years, there were actually many summers during which 200 or more abandoned campfires had been found and extinguished by district fire personnel before they were declared wildfires.

The district’s success in 2014 was due largely to focused fire prevention efforts beginning almost 15 years ago that have chipped away at the leading cause of human fires on the district – abandoned campfires. Specifically, district fire prevention specialist Bob Blasi worked to gain compliance in dispersed camping areas and issued citations when necessary. With increased early-morning patrols, an extensive signing program, visits to local schools, Smokey Bear presence at local events, and a consistent prevention message for more than a decade, Blasi was able to systematically reduce the number of abandoned campfires and, therefore, the overall number of human-caused wildfires.

“This goal seemed almost impossible,” Blasi said. “Only one careless action by a single person can have a devastating outcome, as we see every year across this country somewhere in the wildlands of America. There were a couple years in the past decade when we only had two or three human-caused fires. It was then I realized that with a little extra effort focused on specific targets with increased fire prevention patrols, it might just be obtainable.”

Besides traditional fire prevention techniques such as patrols and signing, the Tusayan Ranger District has also been a leader in putting fire back on the landscape as frequently and broadly as conditions have allowed. Over the past 12 years, nearly 40 percent of the 327,250-acre Tusayan district has been treated with thinning and fire, which has contributed enormously to reducing human-caused wildfire.

“Because most of the popular camping areas have already been treated with fire at appropriate times of the year, these areas are less likely to catch on fire during the hottest, driest months,” Johnson said. “To truly prevent wildfire, you have to use all of the fire prevention tools available in combination.”

During the 2014 monsoon season alone, the Tusayan Ranger District managed more than 17,000 acres of fire across the landscape in order to improve forest health and reduce the likelihood of future high-severity fires resulting from sources such as abandoned campfires.

“Because of the support of fire managers, Kaibab National Forest leadership, the community and public, we have been able to go beyond just re-introducing fire into the ecosystem, to take it to the next level and demonstrate how when fire is managed responsibly, it becomes an integral part of obtaining desired forest health,” Blasi said. “This is the proof in the pudding. The more fire treatments we are able to successfully implement, the better chance we have of reducing and ultimately eliminating unwanted human-caused fire in our part of the forest.”

While focused fire prevention efforts have decreased the number of abandoned campfires in the Tusayan area, the challenge of eliminating all human-caused fires will continue. Each fire season brings a unique set of challenges including millions of new visitors to a popular tourist destination.

“If I were to designate one goal for the future, it would be that this record never last 50 years again,” Blasi said. “Eliminating human-caused fires is attainable through education, prevention and good stewardship.”

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