

FIRE *and* VEGETATION MANAGEMENT

STORY BY PETER STEKEL



(Above) Teamwork helps in clearing vegetation photos courtesy of USFS, National Interagency Fire Center by Tom Story **(inset) A drip-torch prescribed burn in Sequoia grove** photos courtesy of NPS/Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks

Fire season came early this year when drought, heat and millions of dead trees sparked concern that catastrophic fires could sweep through the Sierra. Concern hasn't solely been centered here. With drought a way of life in the West, agencies throughout the region, including Southern California (where conditions are the driest) are always preparing for fire. With one eye to the future and another eye on the past, Sierra residents wonder how management decisions in national parks and

forests affect fire suppression efforts near their communities.

Sue Exline, Public Affairs Officer for the Sierra National Forest, says, "We have many tools to manage fire," and, "the US Forest Service policy for fighting fires varies according to the situation." Suppression is the main tool used when fire impacts a natural resource or threatens communities and private property. But Exline points out that suppression doesn't always give positive long term results. "Over the last hundred

years we have altered the natural fire cycles and this has led to a dangerous increase of vegetation."

California suffered greatly from fire last year with 739,000 acres of forest burned along with 3,600 homes and 22 lives lost. Those fires occurred mainly in the south, in a different ecosystem than the Sierra Nevada. But increasing urbanization in the "wildland-urban interface" (WUI) means that people living in the foothills and forests of the Sierra are equally at risk as their



(Above) Firefighters battle a foothill blaze photos courtesy of NPS/Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks

southern neighbors.

The US Forest Service reports that 70% of the 11.5 million acres of national forest in the Sierra are unnaturally dense and choked with thick stands of trees and other vegetation. "The overcrowded conditions have left the forests highly susceptible to drought, disease and insect infestations — primed for intense and damaging wildfires."

The risk of wildfire is a fact of life in the Sierra. Lightning starts most natural fires. Human-caused fires start by accident or arson. Managing fire risk requires coopera-

tion between residents and public lands agencies.

About \$340 million/year is spent in the Sierra Nevada at the federal level for forest management and for preventing and suppressing wildfires. Some of that money finances National Fire Plans. "Up and down California there are grass roots Fire Safe Councils, engaging with the federal government to work on fuel reductions in partnership with the forest service," says Sue Exline.

In Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, resource managers work hard to

build fuel breaks and reduce fuels around gateway communities. "By managing vegetation, we're trying to the best of our abilities to reduce fuels in strategic locations and restore healthy ecosystems," says Jody Lyle, fire education specialist in Sequoia and Kings Canyon. Lyle says the parks mechanically remove vegetation in areas immediately adjacent to structures. "We aren't using it as an ecological tool," she says. "We remove trees, shrubs and limbs around visitor centers and campgrounds."

Sequoia and Kings Canyon have managed vegetation with prescribed fires for two generations. Their goal is to restore natural fire cycles and return to natural conditions without heavy fuel loads. Before a prescription, contingency resources are planned, fire lines built and local agencies consulted for cooperation in helping with the burn. For 2004, 3,900 acres were treated with nine prescribed fires. Three mechanical projects treated 40 acres. Lyle reports that both figures were down from the usual 10,000 total acres, "Because budgets were lower and because we expected a severe fire season."

Park visitors don't always appreciate prescribed fire since smoke obscures views. Gateway communities surrounding Sequoia and Kings Canyon dislike the smoke too and there are air quality issues (see the upcoming November issue of *Sierra Heritage Magazine*). Some residents outside the Park would prefer the fuels accumulate rather than deal with smoke impacts in their community. "You don't throw your hands up and say the fuels are bad and we aren't going to do anything about it," Lyle says. That's irresponsible.

Lyle says that when it comes to fighting fire with fires, Sequoia and Kings Canyon has shown success with 1-2 acre burns around Park Headquarters and other strategically located areas. These burns can reduce the fast spread of a fire that could ignite along the highway from carelessly tossed cigarettes and demonstrates that, "The Park Service wants to be a good neighbor and act responsibly, dealing with fuel conditions on our federal lands."

Lightning-caused fires fall under a management technique called "wildland fire

use.” Decisions are made within the first few hours of discovering a fire to determine the procedure. “We must decide if the fire is unwanted (and then suppressed) or if it has a resource value (to reduce fuel loads, for instance),” says Lyle. If so, it is allowed to burn or spread naturally while still being intensely monitored.

Sequoia and Kings Canyon has implemented a wildland fire use policy for over 30 years while the Sierra National Forests just started with this kind of program last year. “This is historic because our two agencies share a very large boundary,” says Lyle. In the past, when lightning fires occurred both agencies worked to suppress the blaze. Many of these fires were in wilderness areas that could have benefited from non-sup-

pression. Their remoteness also meant they cost a lot of money to fight.

With a population of 35 million and limited governmental budgets, Californians living in the WUI must shoulder their share of the responsibility for managing fire risk. To do that, get involved in community-based Fire Safe Councils. Provide defensible space around your home. Don't stack stove wood under your porch or alongside the house. Clean the roof and rain gutters of pine needles. Clear vegetation around your house. Provide turnaround space in your driveway for fire trucks. And finally, if you live at the end of a hidden driveway, hang a shingle at the road with your name and/or street address so your home can be found — just in case. **SH**



HEALTHY FORESTS BY PETER STEKEL

After the devastating fires in California and other western states last year, Congress passed what is being called the “Healthy Forests Initiative.” Their understanding was that it would restore ecological health and make communities safe from fire by, among other things, cutting trees up to 30” in diameter in old growth forests far from the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

Sue Exline from Sierra National Forest says, “The cost of thinning the present forest to make it more like the forest of the past, even only in strategic sites, is huge. A small part of the cost will be offset by any timber sales which can be achieved by thinning trees less than 30” in diameter. Although only a few trees larger than 20” in diameter will be thinned on each area treated, these may generate nearly \$80 million each year to help pay for removal of economically worthless, but highly flammable brush.”

The picture isn't that rosy according to the Sierra Nevada Forest Protection Coalition (SNFPC), a coalition of groups including the Wilderness Society, Sierra Club and other groups that have worked independently on issues affecting the Sierra Nevada. The Coalition is convinced the initiative will actually increase the risk of fire to WUI communities through the way the plan is implemented.

“By cutting large trees in the general forest, you're not really protecting communities,” says Coalition conservation and communication coordinator, David Graves. Risk isn't reduced by logging old growth forest; it's reduced by thinning trees and removing brush near local communities. “We support



Chain saw skills are mandatory photos courtesy of USFS, National Interagency Fire Center by Tom Story

thinning of trees up to 30" in diameter only in WUI," says Graves.

Before the initiative, after years of working with environmental groups, scientists, researchers and different stakeholders involved in the Sierra Nevada, the US Forest Service produced the Sierra Nevada Framework. "It focused on reducing small fuels and brush — the really flammable things in the forest," says Graves. "The Framework called for reducing those fuels to lower fire risk," and focused on using prescribed fire as one of the tools for maintaining a healthy forest.

All that changed last January when the Forest Service released revisions to the Framework: a program they called "Forests With A Future." Graves says, "These revisions are in line with the Healthy Forests Initiative by allowing the cutting of trees up to 30" in diameter throughout the general forest."

The Coalition's Graves points out that areas outside of the WUI may experience an increase in fire risk from the Framework revisions. "When you cut large trees, you're opening up a previously shaded area to sunlight. This encourages the growth of small trees and brush." These "ladder fuels" could actually cause a larger fire.

Eliminating shade also allows the snowpack to melt faster and makes soils dry out faster — which ups the fire risk too. Cutting large trees increases wind speed that could whip down hillsides and spread flames if ever there is fire.

The Coalition supports the original Sierra Nevada Framework, not only because it comprised years of cooperative work but because it represents good science.

And there's another reason Grave points to for questioning the efficacy of reducing fire risk with revised Framework plan as expressed in the Healthy Forests Initiative. "In the past, 75% of fire reduction money was spent in the WUI. Under the new plan it is reduced to 50%." That missing 25% is being spent to support increased logging in the general forest — away from the communities that need the money the most.

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