U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Fire Management

Keeping Fire on Our Side

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages fire in order to conserve, protect and enhance habitat for fish, wildlife and plants on its 548 national wildlife refuges, 69 national fish hatcheries and thousands of small wetlands and wildlife management areas. Whether it is used to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems or suppressed to protect valuable resources, fire management is integral to ensuring the safety and health of human and biological communities.

The majority of Service lands evolved with fire and they require fire's cleansing effects in order to remain healthy. Without the unique ecological benefits of fire, the health of most refuges – and the wildlife that depends on them – would suffer, and the threat of catastrophic wildfire would increase dramatically.

Service employees have been experts in the safe, cost-effective use of prescribed fire since 1930s and regularly use fire to accomplish the mission of protecting communities and resources, reducing fuels, and enhancing and maintaining wildlife habitat in fire-adapted ecosystems. The Service has traditionally been a leader among Department of Interior agenices in the number of acres it treats annually with fire.

Each year, the Service also allows wildfire to play a natural role on its refuges, especially in federally designated wilderness areas. This is the least-expensive method of managing fire and involves Service personnel closely monitoring fires within defined parameters.

Every national wildlife refuge has a detailed fire management plan that specifies how hazardous fuels should be reduced on the refuge. The plans also discuss wildland fire use, fire suppression and the stabilization and rehabilitation of natural resources damaged by wildfire. These plans are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System's (NWRS) comprehensive conservation planning process. These fire plans, especially as they dovetail with National Fire Plan concepts, are increasingly important because of the continuing expansion of the wildland-urban interface.

Due to the traditional and ongoing use of fire to maintain these ecosystems, the majority of Service-managed lands currently are rated as Fire Regime Condition Class 1, meaning that the lands are at low risk of sustaining loss of ecosystem components if a wildfire were to strike. Loss of life and property on Service lands due to wildfire has historically been minimal where prescribed fire and mechanical/chemical removal of hazardous fuels has been used regularly.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages lands in every state and U.S. territory, and fire staff is located throughout the country. The Service's fire staff coordinates its activities with other federal, state and local agencies, and often provides wildland fire training to them.

Policy, oversight and support for the Service's fire program is provided by the NWRS Branch of Fire Management, which is headquartered at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, Idaho. The Service is an equal partner at NIFC and in the the National Wildfire Coordinating Group, a wildland fire guidance committee that includes the national fire directors and staff from the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and representatives from the National Association of State Foresters and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Above: *A prescribed burn on Cedar Island National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina reduces wildfire risk to nearby homes while benefiting wildlife. (USFWS)*

For more information about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fire program, please visit www.fws.gov/fire