



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Branch of Fire Management
www.fws.gov/fire Update 2005



Prescribed Fire Training Center: Grooming Future Fire Leaders

FLORIDA - Nearly a decade ago, fire managers recognized that the demand for highly trained prescribed fire professionals was on the rise. Because fire knowledge, fire leadership, and field skills are dynamic things, there needed to be one place where fire professionals could build on what they already knew. That's when the National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center was born.

The Center opened in Tallahassee, Florida in 1998. Fittingly, it is located in Southeast, the heart of where most prescribed fire is conducted in the United States. The Center caters to fire professionals from federal agencies, Tribes, private conservation organizations, contractors and communities. So far, 758 fire professionals from 46 states and 10 foreign countries have received training at the Center. They leave having improved their skills in using prescribed fire to reduce hazardous fuels, and meet National Fire Plan and natural resource management objectives, especially in the wildland urban interface.

Other agencies and land managers in the Southeast benefit from the Center's training, as burn teams are assembled and assigned prescribed fire projects on lands managed by federal, state, local and private entities. To date, the teams have conducted 1,135 of these burns, totaling nearly a half-million acres. The large geographic area increases the likelihood of weather and fuel conditions being suitable for a prescribed burn on any given day. Such collaboration benefits students and land managers, with each person learning from the other's perspective.

The Center's director, Phil Weston, is a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employee, whose current staff includes fire professionals from the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service. The Center is guided by an interagency steering committee with representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service, U.S.D.A. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, National Association of State Foresters, The Nature Conservancy and Tallahassee Community College. Training teams comprise a variety of individuals from varying agencies, and there are even workshops for high-level administrators to help them understand their agency's fire program.

The Center sends its students home with this concept: more prescribed fire means fewer wildfires. It's a lesson taught over and over on public lands where previously burned areas help stop wildfires. Students leave the Center with "10 Take Home Messages," reminders of the successes they've had that could apply to their home units. In pursuit of their career paths, students also can earn five hours of college credit through the Center and Tallahassee Community College, which can create opportunities for firefighters to step up to professional-series jobs.

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Students at the National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center spend considerable time in the field learning burn techniques. (USFWS)



Fire Preparedness Pays Off for Puerto Rico Refuges

PUERTO RICO - In March, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service received some sobering news: the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, home to eight national wildlife refuges, was having its second driest spring in 50 years. The drought and an abundance of dry grass produced by heavy rains the previous year suggested the fire season at refuges here could be red hot.

Faced with this forecast, Service fire managers obtained approval for regional "severity funding" for \$270,000. The money was allocated over a six-week period, allowing the Service to mobilize resources for Cabo Rojo, Culebra and Vieques refuges.

Between January 1 and March 29, Puerto Rico experienced 5,100 fires, more than triple the number in 2004. From mid-March through April alone, more than 50 wildfires blazed. Service and local crews and incident commanders were dispatched to the fires. The additional resources enabled fire managers to contain all the fires at less than 100 acres.

Local response to the fires was made possible by Service grants from the Rural Fire Assistance program to five volunteer fire departments in Puerto Rico. The RFA grants have been available since 2001 to volunteer fire departments in small, rural communities near national wildlife refuges, fish hatcheries and waterfowl production areas. The grants allow the departments to acquire wildland firefighting equipment, supplies and training. In Puerto Rico, the grants helped train 100 volunteers in wildland fire behavior, fire suppression and safety -- especially important because the three refuges do not have fire personnel on staff. They depend on the local professional fire departments to respond to fires. There are nearly 20 refuges located in U.S. Territories in the Pacific and Caribbean island chains that are in similar situations.

The events in Puerto Rico last spring exemplify how fire season forecasting can be used to cost-effectively allocate funds and resources where they are needed most. In the Southwest, for example, below-normal potential for wildland fire was predicted for high elevations, while above-normal potential was forecast for lower elevations because greater-than-expected precipitation produced abundant vegetation growth that will dry out in the summer and provide fuel for wildfires.

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Burning 5,000 Acres of Marsh Returns Habitat to Nesting Waterfowl

CALIFORNIA - Fire managers from the Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Tulelake, California burned more than 5,000 acres of marsh in February 2005, renewing waterfowl habitat, reducing wildfire risk to nearby communities, and providing a bit of entertainment for highway travelers.

Choked with overgrown native hardstem bulrush, a number of marsh units at Tule Lake and Lower Klamath national wildlife refuges require periodic prescribed fire to reclaim essential nesting areas for waterfowl such as pintail, mallard, gadwall and canvasback. The inaccessible marsh was ignited using a helicopter and trained refuge firefighters. Refuge personnel also conducted ground control, ensuring that the fires remained within prescribed boundaries. The end result was twofold: wildfire risk reduction and habitat renewal.

The use of prescribed fire and wildland fire on national wildlife refuges helps meet refuge goals and ensures healthier, more productive landscapes, as well as safer communities for both people and wildlife. Burnable acres on refuges and other Service lands are classified in terms of the degree of departure from their natural condition, Condition Class I being the most natural condition and least likely to cause a damaging fire with loss to ecosystem components, Class III being the least natural, and Class II being in the middle. Approximately 60 percent of the acreage burned on Service lands this year has been Class II and III. At Klamath Basin, regular maintenance burning of Class I marshlands keeps them from degrading into Class II or III.

The prescribed fires at the marsh were a big hit with travelers on California Highway 161, who stopped at a roadside turnout and along established refuge tour routes to view the flames. Their questions created an opportunity for refuge firefighters to teach them about the benefits of prescribed fire. Once people understood that the fire was intended to clear hazardous fuels from waterfowl habitat areas and improve conditions, they expressed support for the refuge's management policies and objectives.

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Hats Off to Forecaster for Accurate Weather Warning

MISSISSIPPI – It was a classic case of “you can’t believe everything you read.”

National Weather Service Fire weather forecaster Tim Destri recently helped the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service prevent a prescribed burn from turning into an unwanted wildfire at Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge, and he did it by not quite believing his computer weather models.



National Weather Service forecaster Tim Destri (center) got some attention when he was presented with an award averting a potential wildfire. From left to right, Mark Jamieson (Fire Management Officer, Southeast Louisiana NWR), Tony Wilder (Fire Management Officer, FWS Region 4-District 7), Paul Trotter (Meteorologist-in-Charge, NWS New Orleans/Baton Rouge Forecast Office), Tim Destri (Fire Weather Forecaster, NWS New Orleans/Baton Rouge Forecast Office), Jeff 'Bunk' Twiss (Fire Program Technician, Mississippi Sandhill Crane NWR), and Sue Grace (FWS Region 4 Fire Ecologist). (USFWS)

The Mississippi refuge sits squarely in an area of unpredictable weather patterns generated by Gulf Coast winds. Yet because the refuge contains flammable vegetation that needs routine burning in order to reduce wildfire risk to surrounding communities, fire professionals are always looking for opportunities to burn. They believed they’d found one on March 11. As it turns out, the prescribed fire could have escaped control lines because of unusual weather.

Refuge fire staff asked Destri to run computer models to help them predict fire behavior on the 538-acre burn. Fortunately, Destri didn’t just rely on what the computer said. He checked and re-checked actual weather observations throughout the morning, trying to predict relative humidity for an afternoon spot-forecast. His spot forecast? Don’t burn. When relative humidity dropped to an unprecedented 14 percent on the Mississippi Gulf Coast later in afternoon, refuge managers were glad they heeded the forecaster’s warning. The refuge fire staff ended up helping

extinguish several unrelated wildland fires that day on lands near the refuge.

“We would like to commend...Tim Destri for his diligence in checking actual observations and not relying entirely on model data,” wrote refuge project leader Alan Schriver in a commendation letter to Destri’s supervisor, “and for his continued support throughout the morning as we came to a decision on whether to proceed with the burn.”

Carefully planned prescribed fire gives refuge managers the flexibility to burn under the right conditions, safely managing fire and smoke to benefit natural resources while keeping firefighters and the public safe. These actions help reduce the risk of devastating wildfires that can threaten people, communities, and plant and animal communities.

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Mid-Plains Handcrew Receives National Award; Crew Trains for 2005 Fire Season

NEBRASKA - Twenty-six members of the Mid-Plains Interagency Handcrew gathered for training and orientation in Halsey, Nebraska in mid-May 2005 to make their team into a top-notch wildland firefighting resource for the Great Plains states. Among them were three men who were recognized nationally for excellence in leading the crew.

Firefighters Pat Harty and Todd Schmidt of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Rodney Redinger of the Kansas Forest Service, who rotate as crew boss, received the 2005 Paul Gleason Lead By Example Award for mentoring the handcrew and building them into a true team. The national award was created in memory of wildland firefighter Paul Gleason who was best known for developing the LCES concept (Lookouts, Communication, Escape routes, Safety zones), which has become the foundation of wildland firefighter safety. The award, which covers several areas of excellence, honors those who demonstrate the leadership for which Gleason was known. The National Wildfire Coordinating Group names winners each spring based on nominations.



The Mid-Plains Interagency Handcrew bosses. Left to right: Todd Schmidt (Quivira NWR), Pat Harty (Lacreek NWR) and Rodney Redinger (Kansas Forest Service). (USFWS)

Like the experienced crew bosses, the Mid-Plains firefighters are mostly return crewmembers, though some are new to the team. A handcrew is a team of firefighters specifically trained and organized to fight wildfires with limited or no water, instead using hand tools and chainsaws. The Mid-Plains handcrew comprises employees from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service and the Kansas Forest Service and come from Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado and South Dakota. The training and orientation session was a first for the handcrew, but plans call for the training to become an annual event.

The crew's formation has increased collaboration between participating agencies, and has made for good community relations in Mid-Plains states. Training included a formal classroom course as well as field training in radio operations, field ignition, physical fitness, map/compass reading, and an idea borrowed from the military: sand tables. This involves drawing a rough scene in dirt, or sand, to illustrate firefighting tactics and is a way to test a firefighter's ability to make decisions.

The week of training ended with the crew breaking into squads for dispatch to simulated fires. There the designated squad leaders practiced making critical decisions during a simulated fire. The firefighters filled out evaluation forms after the training, praising the field exercise portion as extremely helpful. The squad bosses chosen to lead the teams during the simulated fires will be the primary squad bosses for the handcrew this summer.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sponsored the training in partnership with the Kansas Forest Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

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Prescribed Fire Season Starts in the Midwest States

MINNESOTA - As sure as the snow and ice melting from lakes and migratory birds returning to their breeding grounds are signs of spring, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service prepares for the start of another prescribed fire season.

Through mid-June, the Service mobilized equipment to conduct prescribed fires on Service-managed National Wildlife Refuges and Wetland Management Districts throughout Minnesota and other Midwest states. Prescribed fire is one of several tools used by the Service and other land managers to reduce the risk of wildfires on lands near populated areas and improve wildlife habitat.

While the landscape may not appear completely green after a burn, fire produces great benefits to native plants, grassland birds and other wildlife. Prescribed fire simulates historic, naturally occurring wildfires that stimulate growth of prairie plants and grasses while removing invasive trees and other undesirable vegetation.



Prescribed fires on national wildlife refuges and other public lands lessen the severity of wildfires, which can damage or destroy private property. Prescribed fires also revitalize much-needed habitat for wildlife. (USFWS)



By mid-June the Service's Midwest Region had completed prescribed burns on 61,597 acres, and removed hazardous fuels by mechanical means on 1,145 acres. Last year, Service fire crews used prescribed fire to burn more than 45,746 acres.

Each year, the Service targets a set number of acres it hopes to burn," said Dave Lentz, regional fire program manager, "but accomplishing the goal depends on weather and other factors. When weather, availability of fire crews and budgets are cooperating, we can exceed our targets."

Before a burn begins, wind speed and direction, temperature, relative humidity and fuel conditions are measured, as well as a number of other considerations such as smoke dispersal and proximity of nearby buildings.

"We want the public to know that safety is our primary concern on all of our fires," Lentz said.

Contact Dave Lentz, 612/713-5366

Fire Management Plans Approved for Hatcheries in Northeastern States

MASSACHUSETTS - Between October 2004 and February 2005, Marvin Moriarty, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northeast Regional Director, approved brand new fire management plans for 10 of the 12 national fish hatcheries in the region. The plans define how the hatcheries will suppress wildfires or manage prescribed burns and debris-pile burning to protect nearby communities, as well as natural and cultural resources.

The national fish hatcheries (NFH) that have new fire plans, as well as the towns they affect are:

Virginia: Harrison Lake NFH affecting the wildland urban interface communities of Harrison Lake and Wayside;

Massachusetts: Richard Cronin National Salmon Station affecting Sunderland; North Attleboro NFH and Berkshire NFH, affecting North Attleboro, Monterey and New Marlborough;

Maine: Craig Brook NFH, affecting East Orland, and Green Lake NFH affecting Ellsworth;

West Virginia: White Sulphur Springs NFH affecting White Sulphur Springs;

Pennsylvania: Allegheny NFH affecting Warren; Northeast Fishery Center Complex affecting Lamar;

New Hampshire: Nashua NFH affecting Nashua;

Vermont: White River NFH affecting the wildland urban interface communities of Windsor and Pittsfield; Pittsford NFH affecting the wildland-urban interface communities of Chittenden and Mendon.

The U.S. Department of the Interior requires an approved fire management plan for any areas with burnable vegetation. The region's fire management staff stepped in to help the Northeastern hatcheries satisfy that requirement. During a two-year period, the region's fire management coordinator, fire management officers and others met with hatchery staff to gather information for the plans. Those visits also prompted the region to clarify regional guidance on burning debris piles.

Because the approved fire plans are now in place, the Service awarded more than \$50,000 in Rural Fire Assistance grants in 2004 and 2005 to several local fire departments. The money was used to buy brush truck tires and rims, hoses, and portable tanks as well as personal protective equipment and weather instruments, and pay for training.

Developing the plans involved collaboration between the Service's fisheries and refuges divisions, and local entities, including Hampshire College, the Western Center for Sustainable Aquaculture, the University of Massachusetts Extension, and Berkshire Hatchery Foundation.

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Wilderness Fire Grows at Kenai NWR

ALASKA - The King County Creek Fire, which is burning in wilderness across from Skilak Lake at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, grew to more than 2,800 acres on June 27, prompting fire managers to dispatch a Type II Incident Management Team to the area, including Hot Shots and handcrews.



Smoke rises from the King County Creek Fire in a wilderness area at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (USFWS)

The fire was started by a lightning strike on June 26, and for several reasons managers implemented plans to fight it rather than let it burn under managed conditions: the fire was within five miles of dwellings and the area burning contained continuous tracts of mature black spruce, which is a volatile fuel-type; the fire was expected to burn a long time because it is early in the season; the weather was expected to be warm, dry and windy; resources to fight the fire were already stretched thin due to the fire at Ft. Yukon; there was a risk of additional fires due to thunderstorms and the upcoming 4th of July weekend; if the fire were allowed to burn, smoke in that area at this time of year could cause human health and safety issues.

While the fire will be fought, it will be done with minimum impact suppression tactics to protect wilderness values. Also, a rehabilitation plan will be prepared if necessary.

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Endangered Fish Rescued from Fire

ARIZONA - While firefighters work to protect people and homes from Arizona's Cave Creek Complex fire, smaller victims were saved on June 28 as a team of

eight biologists rescued about 200 Gila topminnow that were in danger of suffocating from sediment accumulation due to the fire.

Jeff Whitney, a desert fish coordinator for the Service's Southwest region and former regional fire management coordinator, is Incident Commander for one of 16 national incident management teams. Coincidentally, his team was assigned to this incident and he made the decision that the fish rescue be attempted.

Wildlife workers from the Arizona Game and Fish Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Forest Service and others hiked four miles near the huge fire to Lime Creek to rescue the fish. The workers used nets to remove the fish from the creek and carried them out in bucket-like containers rigged like backpacks.

The Lime Creek Gila topminnow population is the longest re-established population the fish, as well as one of the largest, making it invaluable to the species' recovery. The fish were taken to a hatchery in Page Springs until Lime Creek is secure and clean enough for their return.

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Workers use nets to dip endangered Gila topminnow out of Lime Creek. The fish are imperiled by the Cave Creek Complex fire in Arizona. (USFWS)

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