U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Fire on National Wildlife Refuges

Red-headed woodpecker

We manage wildfires to protect communities and sustain wildlife habitat.

- An average of 500 wildfires burn 600,000 acres of national wildlife refuge lands annually. Most are caused by human carelessness.
- More wildfires occur on refuges in southern and eastern states than in the west, partly because of the relative size of the Refuge System's land base.
- Managing fires as they burn without threatening lives, homes, or critical habitat is a natural way to clear overgrown vegetation and rejuvenate ecosystems.

Managing wildland fire in natural areas near homes takes expertise and experience. More than 700 communities are adjacent or close to refuges.

We use prescribed fire to protect wildlife and people.

- More than 50% of refuge lands (and more than 90% in Alaska) are fire-adapted ecosystems, which depend on periodic fire.
- Using planned burns clears dead and overgrown vegetation before it can fuel a large, damaging wildfire. These burns also stimulate growth of plants, which are forage for wildlife.
- No other method of clearing overgrown vegetation yields the same ecological benefits or cost-savings as wildland fire.
- An average of 1,500 planned burned are conducted each year on refuges, treating over 350,000 acres.

Our Fire Management Program

- Annual budget: $80 million.
- Staff: 500 full-time fire management specialists across the country.
- Climate change will lead to more fire in many areas: larger, more intense, longer lasting, with more smoke. Fire managers can help refuges cope with these challenges.
- Invasive species continue to spread on refuges. Ongoing research is helping fire managers learn how best to combat different non-natives.

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