

APPENDIX H: FIRE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM



Prescribed burn on the refuge: USFWS

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Fire Management Program

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge system is “to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

The Role of Fire

Historically, natural fire and ignitions by Native American people played an important role in many ecosystems by removing fuel accumulations, decreasing the impacts of insects and diseases, stimulating regeneration, cycling nutrients, and providing a diversity of habitats for plants and wildlife.

In the heavily manipulated areas of the Northeast United States, that role has been modified significantly. However, when fire is used properly it can –

- reduce hazardous fuels build-up in both wildland-urban interface (WUI) and in non-WUI areas;
- improve wildlife habitats by reducing the density of vegetation, and/or changing plant species composition;
- sustain and increase biodiversity;
- improve woodlands and shrublands by reducing plant density;
- reduce the susceptibility of plants to insect and disease outbreaks;
- assist in the control of invasive and pest plant species.

Wildland Fire Management Policy and Guidance

In 2001, the secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture approved an update of the 1995 “Federal Fire Policy”. The 2001 “Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy” directs Federal agencies to achieve a balance between fire suppression to protect life, property and resources, and fire use to regulate fuels and maintain healthy ecosystems. It also directs agencies to use the appropriate management response for all wildland fire regardless of the ignition source.

This policy provides nine guiding principles that are fundamental to the success of the fire management program.

- Firefighter and public safety is the first priority in every fire management activity.
- The role of wildland fires as an ecological process and natural change agent will be incorporated into the planning process.
- Fire management plans (FMPs), programs and activities will support land and resource management plans and their implementation.
- Sound risk management is the foundation for all fire management activities.
- Fire management programs and activities are economically viable, on the basis of values to be protected, costs, and land and resource management objectives.
- FMPs and activities are based on the best available science.

- FMPs and activities will incorporate public health and environmental quality considerations.
- Federal, state, tribal, local, interagency and international coordination and cooperation are essential.
- Standardization of policies and procedures among Federal agencies is an ongoing objective

The fire management considerations, guidance, and direction should be addressed in the land use resource management plans (for example, the CCP). The FMP is a step-down plan derived from the land use plans and habitat plans, with more detail on the fire suppression, fire use and fire management activities.

Management Direction

Rappahannock River Valley NWR will protect life, property, and other resources from wildland fire by suppressing all wildfires. Prescribed fire in conjunction with chemical and mechanical fuel treatments will be used in an ecosystem context to protect Federal and private property, and for habitat management purposes. Fuel reduction activities will be applied in collaboration with Federal, state and nongovernmental partners.

Prescribed fire will be used as a management tool to promote and accomplish the goals set forward in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan:

- Contribute to the biological diversity of the mid-Atlantic region by protecting, enhancing, and restoring the refuge's upland habitats, with an emphasis on breeding, migrating, and wintering birds.
- Maintain the long-term biological integrity of riparian habitat along the Rappahannock River and its tributaries for bald eagles and other migratory birds and resident wildlife.
- Maintain and enhance the biological diversity and environmental health of tidal and non-tidal wetlands to benefit Federal-listed species, waterfowl and other migratory birds, fish and shellfish, reptiles and amphibians.
- Promote enjoyment and stewardship of our Nation's natural resources by providing quality, wildlife-dependent recreation and education opportunities on refuge lands and waters.
- Communicate and collaborate with local communities, Federal and state agencies, and conservation organizations throughout the lower Rappahannock River watershed to promote natural resource conservation and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

All aspects of the fire management program will be conducted in a manner consistent with applicable laws, policies, and regulations. Rappahannock River Valley NWR will maintain a FMP to accomplish the fire management goals that follow (see Fire Management Goals). Prescribed fire, chemical, manual and mechanical fuel treatments will be applied in a scientific way, under selected weather and environmental conditions.

Fire Management Goals

The goals and strategies of the National Wildlife Refuge System Wildland Fire Management Program Strategic Plan are consistent with Department of Interior (DOI) and the U.S. Forest Service policies, National Fire Plan direction, the President's Healthy Forest Initiative, National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) Guidelines, initiatives of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, and Interagency Standards for Fire and Aviation operations.

The fire management goals for the Refuge are to use prescribed fire, chemical, and mechanical treatments to:

- reduce the threat to life and property through hazardous fuels reduction treatments; and
- meet the habitat goals and objectives identified in this CCP.

Fire Management Objective

The purpose of the fire management program is to use prescribed fire, chemical, and mechanical treatment to:

- Ensure public and firefighter safety while protecting property and natural resource values from wildfire.
- Reduce the wildfire impacts to all resource management activities. Reduce the threats associated with accumulations of hazardous fuel loads in upland habitats.
- Protect and enhance habitats for State and Federal endangered and threatened species, and species of special concern.
- Provide, maintain, enhance, and protect feeding, resting, nesting and brood habitat that meet the requirements of migratory birds and resident wildlife.
- Facilitate the control of invasive and exotic species.
- Increase habitat diversity.
- Demonstrate and educate the public about the role and benefits of wildland fire protection and prescribed fire in natural resource management
- Maintain current ecosystem diversity within the landscape context, and contribute to the recovery and restoration of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem.
- Comply with State Air Quality Implementation Plans to protect public health and the environment.

Strategies

The refuge will use strategies and tactics that consider public and firefighter safety as well as resource values at risk. Wildland fire suppression, prescribed fire methods, chemical, mechanical means, timing, and monitoring are described in more detail within the step-down FMP.

Prescribed fire burn plans will be developed for specific sites, following the interagency Prescribed Fire planning and Implementation Procedures Reference Guide (2006) template.

Prescribed fire temporarily reduces air quality by diminishing visibility and releasing components through combustion. The refuge will meet the Clean Air Act emission standards by adhering to the State air quality requirements during all prescribed fire activities.

Fire Management Organization, Contacts, and Cooperation

Fire management technical oversight for the refuge has been established in Region 5 of the Service, using the fire management zone approach. Under this approach, fire management staff has been determined by established modeling systems based on fire management workload of a group of refuges, and possibly interagency partners. The fire management workload consists of historical wildland fire suppression activities, as well as historical and planned hazard fuels treatments. At this time, Rappahannock River Valley NWR is within a fire management zone, which includes all the national wildlife refuges in Virginia. The primary fire management staffing and support equipment are located at the Great Dismal Swamp NWR, and are shared among all units. Depending upon budgets and the qualifications of personnel assigned to Rappahannock River Valley NWR, fire qualified individuals may be available at the refuge. All fire management activities are conducted in a coordinated and collaborative manner with the refuge and other Federal and nonFederal partners. The Virginia Fire Management Officer has developed a close working relationship with the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, the National Park Service, and The Nature Conservancy, and these groups regularly work jointly on fire projects. Initial attack of any wildfire is carried out by the local volunteer fire departments under cooperative agreements in place or under development among the agencies.

A new FMP is under development for the refuge, with an expected completion date of December 2008.