



Timing is Everything: Parks Pull-off Early-Spring Burn

Whoosh! The crew member on the helicopter inserted another fusee into the dispenser tube and watched it drop nearly 150 feet to the forest below. Small columns of smoke were starting to be visible on the mountainside. The radio crackled with the message that firefighters on the ground were also beginning ignitions using hand-held drip torches. Finally, after several years of waiting, the Lewis Creek Prescribed Fire was underway.

This prescribed fire, located north of the Cedar Grove area in Kings Canyon National Park, was originally planned as a fall burn. So why were firefighters igniting on March 16 and 17, 2005?

For the last several years, the parks were unable to complete the 1,000-acre project due to regional air quality conditions during September and October. Thus, with cooperation from the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District, the parks took advantage of some warm spring weather and burned 30% of the project. The fire spread in a typical mosaic pattern leaving patches of burned and unburned plants, which mimics how fires burn naturally.

Completing a portion of this prescribed burn during the spring was good for park resources, air quality, and park neighbors.

Burning in the spring is supported by initial results from a research study conducted in these parks beginning in 2000. The study is looking at how plants, animals, and soils are affected by fire depending on the season of burning. While the effects are different, it appears that there are not negative effects from burning in the spring rather than the fall. Of course, early burning is often impossible because fuel moistures can be too wet from snow and rain.

Finally, park visitors, neighbors, employees, and local businesses were not impacted during the burn because the Cedar Grove area, including the road and all facilities, was closed during March as it is every year. The remainder of the project is planned for fall to prevent smoke impacts during the busy summer season.

For more information about the fire and fuels management program at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, go to www.nps.gov/seki/fire/portal/portal.htm.



Top: Fire staff gets ready to ignite the Lewis Creek Prescribed Fire in Kings Canyon National Park by preparing ignition devices called "fusees." Lower Left: Strapped in next to the helicopter's open door, a crew member drops one of many fusees through the Aerial Fusee Ignition Dispenser (AFID). Lower Right: Fire personnel patrol the perimeter of the prescribed burn and use hand-held drip torches to ignite from the fireline.

