

Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Wildland Fire Use Questions & Answers Fire Season 2009

This document provides answers and accompanying photos to promote a better understanding to the following questions about Wildland Fire Use:

- What is it?
- Why would we manage a fire as Wildland Fire Use?
- How does the Forest make that decision?

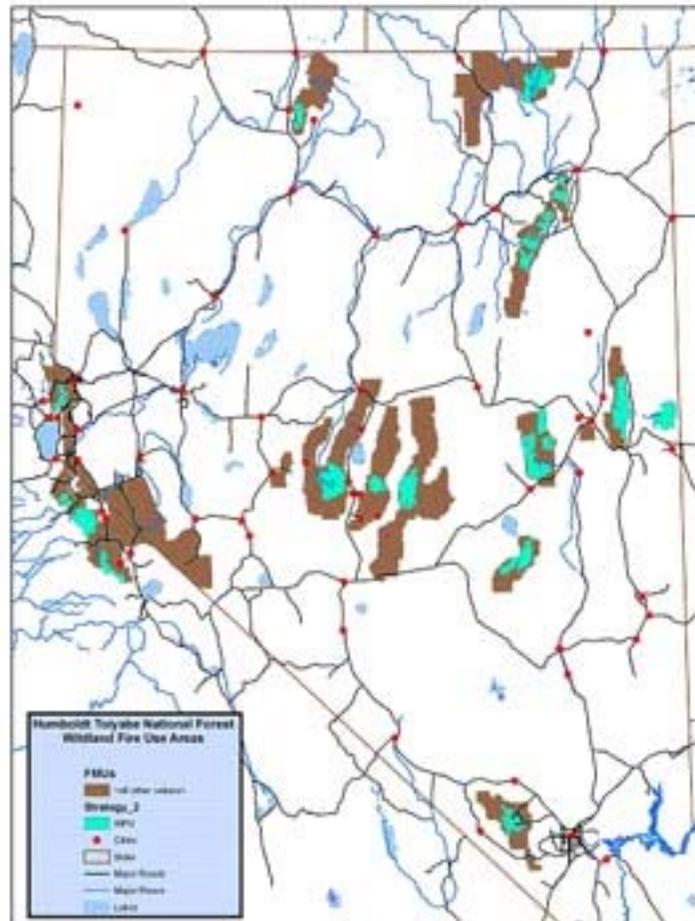
What is Wildland Fire Use?

Wildland Fire Use is the term for wildland fires – non-structure, vegetation fires that occur in the wildland – that are managed to meet resource objectives. Some examples of resource objectives may include: removing dead-and-down logs, creating openings in the tree canopy, encouraging aspen sprouting, or encouraging shrub and grass growth.

Before a Forest can even entertain the idea of managing a fire to meet resource objectives, several conditions need to be in place:

- Only naturally-ignited fires – in Nevada these are usually lightning-ignited – may be managed for resource benefit.
- These lightning fires have to occur in areas that are pre-identified as allowed to have wildland fire for resource benefit. For the Forest Service, Wildland Fire Use areas are designated in the Forest Plan, the document that directs how the Forest Service manages its lands. On the Humboldt-Toiyabe, congressionally designated Wilderness areas, like the Jarbidge Wilderness, may have Wildland Fire Use.
- All individual lightning fires within any of the pre-identified areas are examined to make sure they are the right fire, in the right place, and at the right time before they are actually managed for resource benefit. If any of these conditions are not met, the fire is suppressed.

Map 1: Pre-identified areas for Wildland Fire Use on the Humboldt Toiyabe National Forest



Why manage a fire as Wildland Fire Use?

So why manage a fire for resource benefit? What good does it do? Fire has long been a part of shaping the ecosystem on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. It is an essential element in the life cycle of our Forest, and, some species need fire to regenerate.

Wildland fires burn with different intensities. In some areas, a fire may burn hot, leaving patches of ashes, charred trees and a good seedbed for plants to regenerate. In other areas, cool fires just meander along the ground, burning grass, brush, dead logs, and lower branches. Fire returns valuable nutrients to the soil, opens overgrown areas to sunlight, and allows new growth that provides food and habitat for various animal species. The fuels, dead wood and other debris that could kindle larger, more intense fires, are burned before they become dangerous. The result of this free-burning is a patchwork of young-and-

old vegetations, often referred to as a mosaic. This variety of vegetation promotes a variety of wildlife and a diverse landscape.

This picture, of the *East Slide Rock Ridge Wildland Fire Use on August 14, 2008, shows the mosaic pattern. Towards the bottom of the picture, both live green trees, and dead, red, and gray trees, stand out. In the middle of the picture, note the dark gray dirt, where the fire has burned. Notice also that there are still some green trees within the area that burned. And, finally, it is obvious that there are unburned, tan-colored meadows adjacent to the gray, burned areas.



This next picture, taken on the same day, also illustrates the patchwork burn pattern that results from natural fire. Some areas burned “hot” and cleared out all the vegetation (top right), leaving a prepared seed bed for new grasses, shrubs, and trees. Other areas did not burn completely, and only the grasses and shrubs were consumed (bottom, left side of the ridge).

**Please note that the East Slide Rock Ridge Fire was originally managed for resource benefit as a Wildland Fire Use fire. Strong winds on August 19, 20, 24, and 25 pushed the East Slide Rock Ridge Wildland Fire Use fire out of the Jarbidge Wilderness. At this point, the fire ceased to be managed for resource benefit, and management focused on stopping its spread out of the Wilderness.*



In our Wilderness areas, managers are charged with “allowing fire to play its natural role.” In managing ecosystems that rely on fire to create the varied landscape that is home to a range of plants and wildlife, this means allowing fire to weave its way through the Wilderness. It may do this as long as it doesn’t threaten anyone’s safety, private property, or cultural resources.

How does the Forest decide to manage a fire for resource benefit?

When a lightning fire starts in one of the areas approved for Wildland Fire Use, fire managers, district rangers, and the forest supervisor still must determine if it’s the right fire in the right place at the right time.

Structure and Other Protection Considerations. Even within Wilderness, some areas still need to be protected from wildland fire. Areas that need protection include historic cabins, mining buildings, and recreation sites, among others. Fires in these areas, which will not benefit from wildland fire, are unwanted and are suppressed. On the other hand, if over its projected course a wildland fire will mostly meet resource objectives and any threats it might pose to other resources can be mitigated, the fire may be managed for resource benefit, as a Wildland Fire Use fire.

Fire Use Manager Role. Once the decision to manage a fire for resource benefit is made, an Incident Commander, also called Fire Use Manager, is assigned. This person is responsible for the fire, particularly for ensuring that it does what it is supposed to – meet resource objectives – and that it doesn’t threaten life, property, or public and firefighter safety. To ensure that the fire continues to meet objectives, the Fire Use Manager may take suppression actions on portions of the fire, to keep it within bounds. This can include the full range of suppression tactics, from digging line to dropping retardant. If at any

point the Wildland Fire Use fire ceases to meet objectives, it will no longer be managed for resource benefit and will be suppressed.

Learn more about Wildland Fire Use by visiting this website at:
http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/fireuse/wildland_fire_use/use_index.html.