



**Kern River Ranger District
West Plateau
Wildlife Improvement and Hazardous Fuels Reduction
September 2008**

Submitted by Cindy Thill, Public Affairs, Fire - KRRD

In spring 2005, the Kern River Ranger District (formerly the Cannell Meadow Ranger District) implemented a series of prescribed burns on approximately 4,600 acres of the western portion of the Kern Plateau. This five year project will improve the area's conifer forest and associated wildlife habitat resiliency.

The West Plateau project area is located on the western portion of the Kern Plateau near Big, Long, and Cannell Meadows. This area has a relatively uniform vegetative cover that is highly susceptible to large wild land fire. The project area has no recorded large fire history and is considered prime for a damaging fire event.

Today, prescribed fire is applied to millions of acres in the United States. A single prescribed burn can achieve multiple benefits. A prescribed burn that consumes more dead fuel than it creates will reduce the fire hazard and may also be used to enhance wildlife habitat, manage competing vegetation, control insects, improve forage for grazing, perpetuate fire dependent species, prepare sites for seeding and/or improve appearance or access. In the wild land-urban interface, prescribed burns are often constrained not only by weather conditions, fuel and soil moisture, and other demands, but also by the impacts of smoke.

The purpose of this project is to make the conifer forest and associated wildlife habitat more resilient to wildfire overtime through the reintroduction of managed fire into the ecosystem and starting the process of re-establishing a more normal fire regime. The Kern Plateau has been subject to several large damaging wild land fires since the **1970's**, including the **1975** Flat Fire (17,000), **1977** Bonita Fire (7,500 acres), **1987** Fay Fire (13,000 acres), **2000** Manter Fire (75,000 acres) and **2002** McNally Fire (151,000 acres). These fires burned with such intensity and severity that over 50,000 acres of conifer forest and associated

wildlife habitat have been damaged, and that damage will be felt, for many decades to come.

Species such as the California spotted owl and the Pacific fisher that depend on dense mature forest habitat have been particularly impacted by these fires. Fuel treatments for the purpose of reducing wildfire risk can be compatible with wildlife habitat conservation and ecosystem restoration goals. The vegetation and fuel conditions within the project area are similar to the pre-burned condition of the areas burned in fires listed above.

The West Plateau project implements the objectives of the Forest Plan. This project will result in reducing the intensity and severity of future wild land fires within the project area by: fragmenting the fuels within the project area which will slow and interrupt the fire's ability to spread; disrupting the fuel ladder which will make it much more difficult for a fire to move from the surface fuels to the canopy of the trees; and reducing the amount of fuel which will reduce the amount of heat (intensity) that a future fire will be able to generate.

Our intent is to make the forest more resilient to fire and improve conditions for wildlife. Wildfires that burn into areas where fuels have been reduced by prescribed burning cause less damage and are much easier to control. This is the first step in moving the area back to a more normal fire regime and increasing our ability to manage natural ignitions (lightning fires) for resource benefit.

There are approximately 4,000 acres left to treat. Previous treatments were accomplished through underburns. An underburn is a fire that is constrained to surface fuel and therefore has a low to moderate fire line intensity. Underburns are commonly prescribed for dry forest types such as ponderosa pine or mixed conifer to reduce fuels but leave the overstory intact.

In 2006, 301 acres were treated. In 2007, 215 acres were treated and in the spring of 2008, 130 acres were treated. We are hoping to accomplish another 500 acres this fall (2008). These treatments are accomplished in compliance with the Smoke Management Guidelines specified in the California Code of Regulations (Title 17 – Smoke Management Guidelines for Agricultural and Prescribed Burning). The purpose is to manage the smoke to protect public health, and ensure compliance with air district rules, policies and procedures.



West Plateau prescribed burning during fall 2007. Most of the project area is comprised of open, mature mixed conifer stands with small brush fields intermixed with the trees on moderate slopes.



West Plateau fire crews prepare for holding action along a burn unit flank.