



2008 Fire Season in Review



*The Hidden Fire as seen by air tanker on September 19.
Photo courtesy of the USFS*

This year was an active fire season for the parks with just over 10,000 acres being treated by fire. The parks typically treat about 5,000 acres a year. Historically (prior to fire exclusion policies), an average of 15,000-20,000 acres burned in the parks each year. The difference is in suppression actions taken by firefighters. This year, 12 human-caused fires and 4 lightning fires were suppressed.

Fires are suppressed when they threaten public safety and developed areas, may lead to unacceptable smoke impacts, due to competition for firefighting resources, and other reasons. For example, the **Merhten Fire** was contained at one-tenth of an acre. The fire, ignited by lightning in July, had a high potential for growth that would lead to a multiple-month smoke event in the Middle Fork of the Kaweah Drainage.

Of the fires that were suppressed, fifteen of them totaled less than 2 acres collectively. The exception is the **Hidden Fire**. It's easier to manage fire when contained small.

The lightning-ignited **Hidden Fire** grew in spite of aggressive firefighting efforts. The fire started during hot, dry conditions that included red flag days for low relative humidity. Firefighting efforts certainly checked the growth of the fire during those first days.

Initial fire responders did an excellent job in controlling the western flank—the area of highest

concern because of the fire's potential to spread onto private lands west of the park. Firefighters used indirect firefighting tactics when the terrain became steep and unsafe. Burnout operations on the northern and eastern flanks (including along the Generals Highway) removed fuels in advance of the main fire. The fire was contained at 3,685 acres.

Although the fire was suppressed, beneficial fire behavior was seen in the area. This will lead to greater biodiversity in the area as well as reduce the risk of unwanted fire for the next several years.

The **Tehipite Fire** was ignited by lightning and detected on July 19th. Because of poor air quality throughout the state, firefighters originally attempted to contain the active northern flank of this fire. However, after seven firefighter injuries and numerous control issues in the steep and rugged backcountry, this strategy was abandoned as there were no immediate threats to life or property.



The Tehipite Fire on August 14. NPS photo

The initial containment actions did slow the fire's growth for approximately a month.

Fire managers with the parks and the Sierra National Forest worked in coordination to manage this fire throughout the late summer and fall. The fire grew to 11,595 acres (4,140 acres in Kings Canyon National Park and 7,456 acres on the Sierra National Forest).

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The **Moses Fire** started on the Sequoia National Forest and spread onto Sequoia National Park. It grew to 117 acres, 24 acres of those on the park, before rain quieted the fire.

The parks provided interagency support in fire response throughout the nation and in local mutual aid. Most notable, the parks were able to tap into on-hand firefighting resources for the **Dinely Fire**.

Prescribed Fire/Thinning Projects

Sheep Creek Prescribed Fire - 14 acres.

Zumwalt Prescribed Fire - This project was completed at Cedar Grove in June. 200 acres.

Cedar Bluffs Prescribed Fire - 1,006 acres in Cedar Grove in mid-October. This project was strategically planned to take advantage of the **Roaring Fire** of 2006 that significantly reduced fuels adjacent to the unit and allowed for a higher level of control.

Quarry Mechanical Thinning - 13 acres in the General Sherman Tree Area. This thinning removed ladder fuels, reduced fire hazard, and re-creates how fire would open the area.

Wuksachi Prescribed Fire - 60 acres of the 99 acre project were completed before rain came. This area was previously thinned of ladder fuel and forest debris. The fire provides further protection from unwanted fire for the Wuksachi area.

Davenport Prescribed Fire - Part of a series of treatments, both mechanical and prescribed, to reduce fuels in the Cabin Cove, Silver City, and Mineral King area. 782 acres.

The parks will complete pile burning projects throughout the winter months as conditions permit.

Questions and Answers

In the course of the summer and during the Hidden Fire, some common questions were asked of park staff. A few are shared here.

Is there anywhere in the parks that are not described as steep, rugged, and inaccessible terrain?

Yes, although these locations are limited. The very thing that makes these parks so alluring to visitors—the cliffs, dramatic landscapes, the wilderness, and those passes that leave hikers' knees groaning—also create serious safety issues when it comes to firefighting. Before any firefighter can engage in response to a fire, standard firefighting safety protocols, including escape routes and safety zones that can be used to wait out fire events, must be located. That is problematic in this terrain. Imagine constructing fireline in terrain often difficult to stand on. That is why firefighters often use trails and roads as firelines. Firefighters also look to natural barriers such as rocky areas and rivers to contain fire spread. In the parks' wilderness areas, these options may be limited.

What is direct vs. indirect firefighting?

Firefighters, as a rule, prefer to fight fire directly—that is—next to the fire itself. This allows them the ability to observe the fire behavior and gives them close access to a safety zone—in the already burned area. As firefighters often say, “keep one foot in the black.” Firefighters will respond indirect when direct attack is unsafe. Examples would be steep terrain or fire behavior that compromises firefighter safety (for example, flame length, rapid fire spread, or weather conditions such as changing wind direction that makes the fire behavior unpredictable). Control lines are then constructed away from the fire activity.



Cedar Bluffs Prescribed Fire. NPS photo

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A Season With Engine 72

Engine 72 is a wildland fire engine that is stationed in Three Rivers at the Hammond Fire Station on Mineral King Drive. Like all federal crews, they provide local initial response as well as interagency regional and national response for wildland fire.

Meet the Crew:

Captain Greg Ver
Engineer Richard Martin
Assistant Engineer Michael Ellis
Firefighters: Courtney Wilson, Justin Bramlette, Collin Lawrence, Matt Mateo, Josh Van Aalst

“For me, the Hidden Fire was a highlight. This fire was on my home turf. It was challenging, we were part of the initial attack with the Arrowheads (Interagency Hotshot Crew), and we really clicked as a crew.”

Engine Captain Greg Ver



Engine 72 holds the fireline during the Ash Mountain Prescribed Fire. NPS Photo



*Readiness Review at Lake Success
NPS photo*

Highlights from the 2008 Season:

- * Participated in the Interagency Readiness Review at Lake Success. Other participants included USFS, CalFire, Tulare County, and the cities of Visalia, Porterville, and Hanford.
- * Ash Mountain Prescribed Fire
- * Westfall Fire (part of the Silver Complex) on the Sierra National Forest
- * Whiskeytown Complex, Whiskeytown National Recreation Area
- * Basin Fire, the Los Padres National Forest
- * Marek Fire, the Angeles National Forest

Local Response:

- * The Slick Rock Fire
- * The Amphitheater Fire
- * The Hidden Fire
- * Several false alarm responses

Questions and Answers (cont'd)

What is the difference between a prescribed fire and a burnout operation?

A *prescribed fire* is planned and deliberately set under prescribed parameters for temperature, relative humidity, wind, air quality, and other factors. The intent is to use fire to safely reduce fuels that may lead to a destructive fire in hotter, drier conditions. Prescribed fires of this nature are focused near developed areas for community protection. Prescribed fire also targets fire behavior that achieves ecological goals such as giant sequoia germination.

A *burnout* is a standard fire control measure used by firefighters to remove forest fuels in advance of the main fire and to strengthen fire lines. Ideal conditions (temperature, relative humidity) likely do not exist. This provides containment and safer fire behavior for firefighters. With the Hidden Fire, the burnouts provided control along the southern and eastern flank, including along the Generals Highway.

Do you have a question about the fire program in the parks? If so, please contact the parks Fire Education Specialist.



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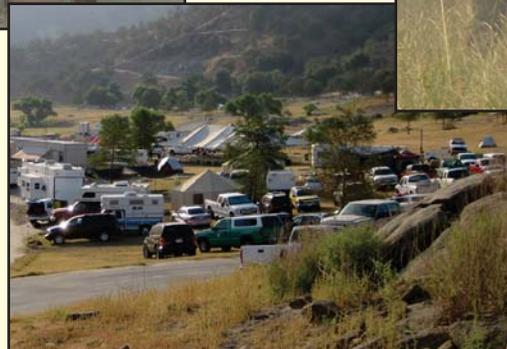
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For More Information
[www.nps.gov/seki/naturescience/
fire.htm](http://www.nps.gov/seki/naturescience/fire.htm)



Fire management in the parks considers smoke management in every step of the program. We know that the mountain communities surrounding the park are affected by fire activity in the parks, both planned and unplanned. The parks appreciate the patience of visitors and residents during this fire season.