

Op-Ed

Kaibab National Forest



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Kaibab National Forest achieves great success in managing fire thanks to community support

The Kaibab National Forest had an incredibly successful summer managing wildland fire thanks to the commitment of our employees to the important work of forest restoration and to the ongoing support we received from the communities of northern Arizona.

From the beginning of the monsoon season in early July to today, the Kaibab National Forest has treated close to 29,000 acres with wildland fire managed for resource benefit. With the extremely dry winter we had and the potential for a severe fire season, it was not a given that we would be able to so broadly allow fire to perform its natural role in the ecosystem this summer. When the monsoons arrived with their accompanying lightning, we looked for every opportunity to let naturally-ignited fires spread in order to clear out understory brush and small trees, create better conditions for wildlife, and reduce the risk of catastrophic crown fires during future fire seasons.

Deciding to manage a fire is never an easy call and involves a range of considerations, from risk to fire fighters and the public, to potential impacts to archaeological and other sensitive forest resources, to the availability of fire personnel and equipment to be assigned to the fire over an unknown period of time. But, one of the major considerations for me in any decision to manage fire is always smoke and its anticipated effects on communities adjacent to the Kaibab National Forest and those farther downwind.

While smoke is an inevitable part of living in the fire-adapted ponderosa pine ecosystem of northern Arizona, I recognize that it can be difficult to deal with over days and weeks when a managed fire is burning nearby. This summer, the Parks and Tusayan communities, in particular, showed incredible resilience and offered enduring support despite fairly long-term managed fires that produced varying levels of smoke from day to day. I also recognize that Parks and Tusayan weren't the only recipients of smoke from Kaibab fires. Communities across northern Arizona often have to deal with smoke from forest restoration projects on lands managed by a number of different agencies. The bottom line is that it was because of the understanding of forest health and community protection issues and the ongoing support provided by our local communities that we were able to accomplish as much as we did this year.

Over the last decade, the Kaibab National Forest treated an average of 11,486 acres per year with wildland fire managed for resource objectives. Even though we more than doubled that accomplishment this year, it was not the number of acres alone that made me proud. We achieved a few critically important milestones with our fires this year.

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The Quaking Fire on the North Kaibab Ranger District reached 500 acres in size before it was doused by heavy rains. While small, it was our first managed fire in mixed conifer forest, which was made possible by the implementation of our new Land and Resource Management Plan released in February. Under our old forest plan, we would have suppressed the fire because it was in mixed conifer forest designated as Mexican spotted owl habitat. Mixed conifer is fairly rare across the larger landscape and is critical for many wildlife species. The Quaking Fire was our first step toward restoring fire to the mixed conifer forest on the North Kaibab, which will go a long way toward protecting wildlife habitat.

The 2,684-acre Belknap Fire on the Tusayan Ranger District drastically improved forest health conditions in one of the few forested areas on the Tusayan district that had not seen widespread fire entry in decades, the Coconino Rim. Due to its location, topography and fuel type, wildfire was not only the most cost effective and efficient way to treat the rim country but also likely the only feasible tool we could use.

Finally, the Sitgreaves Complex on the Williams Ranger District grew to about 11,000 acres and was in a steep, rugged, densely-forested area that many people doubted would see treatment in their lifetimes. At the time the fire started, some fuel moisture levels were still very low from the dry winter and spring, and our old forest plan would have required that we suppress it. Again, thanks to implementation of our new plan, we were able to look at the full scope of fuel conditions and determine that the fire's effects on the mountain would be within desired conditions. I am incredibly pleased with the results of the Sitgreaves Complex, and I am confident that the area will be more resilient to the next fire that occurs, which is especially important given that we have fire starts on Sitgreaves Mountain every year.

This year's successes in managing fire have moved us one step closer to the healthy forest conditions that we all need and want. With a focus on increasing capacity for mechanical treatments through projects such as the Four Forest Restoration Initiative, a continued commitment to managing fire when and where appropriate, and the understanding and support of our local communities, the Kaibab National Forest is making great strides toward a restored and healthy forest.

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